



Raven of the Inner Palace

WRITTEN BY
Kouko Shirakawa

3
NOVEL





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Several black feathers of various sizes and orientations are scattered around the central text, creating a decorative border.

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Seven Seas Entertainment

KOKYU NO KARASU

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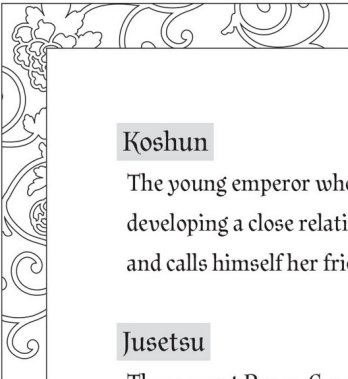
The Rainy Night Visitor

The Turtle Sovereign

The Hand Pulling the Sleeve

The Dusk Jewel





Koshun

The young emperor who recently ascended the throne. He is developing a close relationship with the Raven Consort, Jusetsu, and calls himself her friend.

Jusetsu

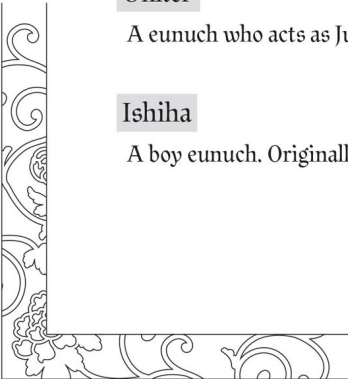
The current Raven Consort. A mysterious and solitary young woman with mystical abilities.

Eisei

A eunuch who pledges absolute loyalty to Koshun.

Jiujiu

Jusetsu's lady-in-waiting. A gentle girl who's prone to sticking her nose into things.



Onkei

A eunuch who acts as Jusetsu's bodyguard on Eisei's orders.

Ishiha

A boy eunuch. Originally from a minority tribe in the west.

Banka

The Crane Consort. One of Kōshun's consorts who still has an innocent side to her. Fond of Jusetsu.

Choyo

Banka's father and member of a powerful clan. Leader of a minority tribe that originated from the land of Kakami generations ago.

Hakurai

A shaman and the founder of a new religion known as the Eight True Teachings.

Injo

The young shrine maiden of the Eight True Teachings.

Reijo

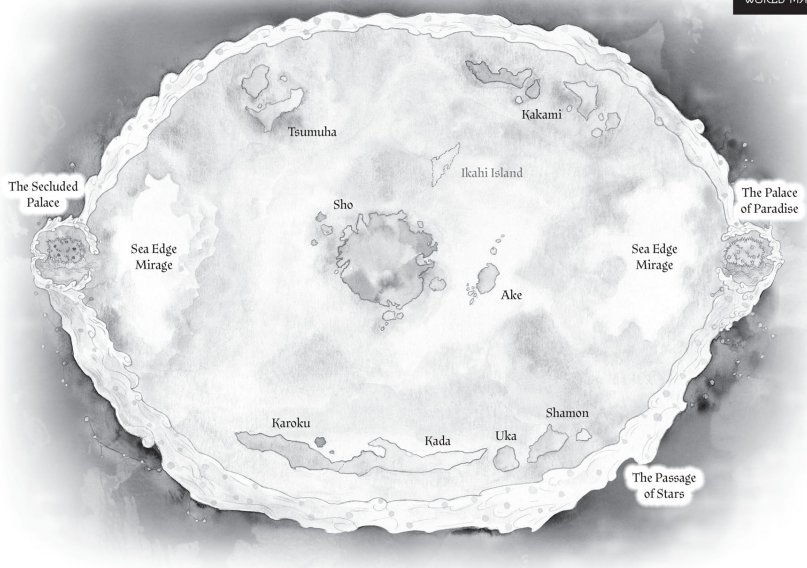
Former Raven Consort. Deceased.

Gyoei

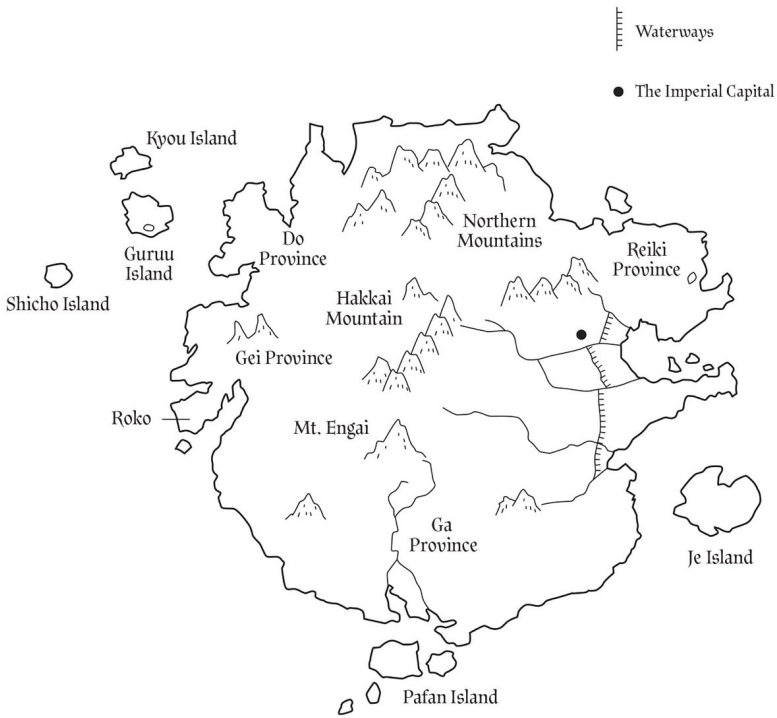
Former Winter Minister. Deceased.

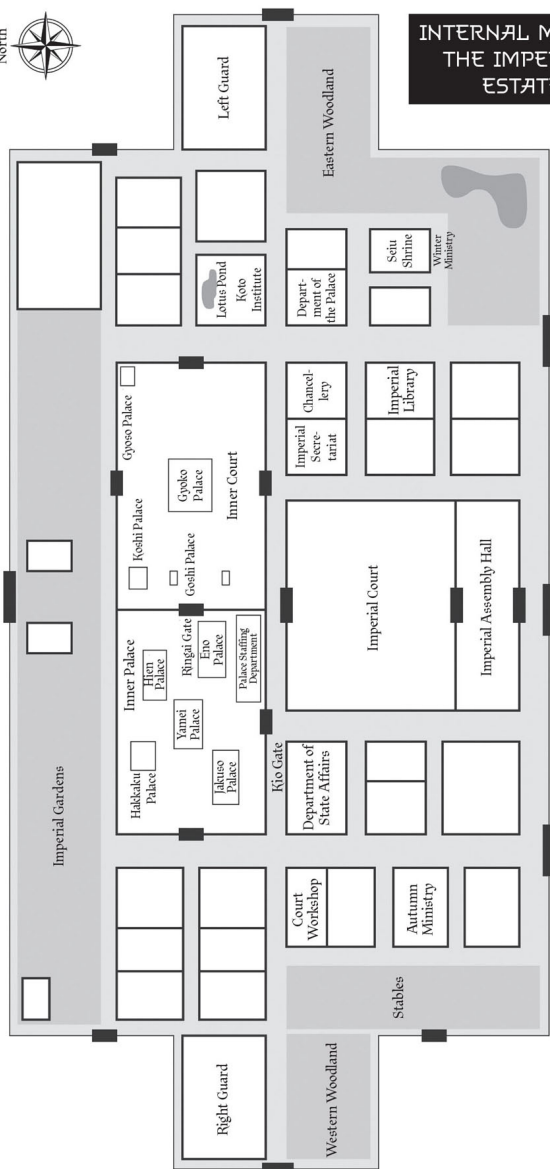
Kajo

Granddaughter of Kōshun's beloved master and grand chancellor, Un Eitoku. Also a childhood friend of Kōshun.



MAP OF SHO





*The Rainy
Night
Visitor*

*All this time, I've been lying here, waiting in the stillness of the night.
Here, in the deepest depths of the sea.*

ISHIHA WOKE UP in the middle of the night. Making sure not to make a sound, he gently sat up in his bed. He felt like he'd had a nightmare. His throat was dry. He had heard rainfall before he fell asleep, but that sound was gone now. Even so, he could still smell the characteristically damp smell that the rain always left behind.

...The smell of the sea was different.

The scent in the air now wasn't like the somewhat bloody stench of the tide, the one that felt like it was sticking to your skin.

Sitting in his bed, Ishiha wrapped his arms around his knees. He hated waking up in the middle of the night like this. Late at night was when he felt the loneliest, the most sorrowful. Memories of his hometown and the day he was made a eunuch would spin around and around inside his head. His chest would get tight. The boy's breathing became labored, and he pressed his forehead against his kneecaps, stifling a sob.

"...Can't you sleep?" said a voice in the darkness. It was Onkei. He'd sensed the boy sitting up in his bed. Ishiha shared a room with Onkei—his superior—in the Yamei Palace.

Ishiha apologized in a panic. "I'm so sorry for waking you up."

It was too dark for Onkei to see the tearful expression on the boy's face, but his voice was nasally. Ishiha could tell that Onkei was staring right at him. The older eunuch slipped out of his bed and left the room. *I must have made him angry*, Ishiha thought, hanging his head—but to his surprise, Onkei returned just moments later.

Onkei was holding a candlestick, and the wavering candlelight lit up his face.

"Here," he said, offering the younger boy a teacup filled with water. He must have ladled it out of the jug in the kitchen. "I thought you might have a dry throat."

"I-I do. Thank you."

How did he know that? Ishiha thought to himself as he drank. It

moistened his parched throat, and he let out a sigh of relief.

“All new eunuchs suffer from nightmares for a little while,” Onkei said calmly. He was a beautiful man, but he had a cold aura that made it hard to get close to him. Even greeting him was enough to make Ishiha and other inferiors nervous. Still, the gentle smiles that would occasionally appear on his lips showed that he was truly a warm person at heart.

“Did you get nightmares too, Onkei?” Ishiha asked.

Onkei didn’t reply. He blew out the flame on the candle, enveloping them in darkness again. The single wisp of smoke it left behind drifted in the air before fading away. The smell of smoke and damp melded together.

Ishiha heard Onkei getting back into bed and laying down. The water that had relieved his throat slowly seeped into his chest and eased the tension in his heart.

His eyelids closed on their own accord and sleep invited him in, as gentle as the sea rocking him back and forth. People from his hometown appeared among the waves before disappearing again. He saw his parents and an old man from the village. He saw the fireside on a stormy day, heard the sound of wind pounding against the hatches, and saw the stars in the night sky—scattered about like silver sand—after the storm had passed. He thought about the old man’s folktale in which the islands had formed from the god’s severed body parts. He thought about the lost souls that drifted into the inlet. Two new lives rained down from the river of stars—one, and then another.

Were those babies next door growing up big and strong? Were his siblings okay? And how was his dear childhood friend Ayura doing?

The rain seemed to have stopped. Jusetu looked over at the lattice window—night had fallen, and all she could see through the window was a deep indigo darkness.

The night air was damp. Once the rainy season had started, heavy rainfall poured down all at once, but never lingered. When the rain stopped, the soil, greenery and even the darkness were left looking vibrant, as if the water revitalized it all. The smell of life was strong.

However, Jusetu didn’t like this time of year. Or rather...it was

probably Uren Niangniang who didn't like it. She couldn't be sure.

Jusetsu glanced at the tabletop. On it sat an item she had been staring at earlier—a two-stranded necklace strung with black pearls. Thanks to the way the light was shining down on it, subtle rainbow patterns appeared on the coal-black pearls.

These pearls were originally the feathers the Owl left behind. They were all that was left of Shogetsu, the man the Owl created. He had burst into feathers when he disappeared, and Jusetsu gathered them up and stuffed them into a gunny sack. However, by the time the next day came around, those feathers had transformed into black pearls. Jusetsu asked the court workshop to link them together for her.

The Owl claimed he was born from a sea bubble—was that why his feathers turned into these? Jusetsu sighed, put the pearls into a box decorated with a pearl inlay, and then shut it away in her cabinet. Staring at the small orbs wasn't going to give her any answers.

Jusetsu didn't even know who she was herself anymore. Was she the Raven? Jusetsu? Or a combination of the two? The Raven had come from the faraway Secluded Palace. Where she was now was the island of the shunned, where those who had sinned washed up. The Raven was locked away inside of Jusetsu to prevent it from escaping. And just as the Owl had created a doll called Shogetsu, Jusetsu was a vessel herself, her purpose being to keep the Raven shut away. Would Jusetsu—being what she was—also turn into feathers before ending up as pearls if her body shattered to pieces?

She let out a snort of laughter. At night, after she dismissed her lady-in-waiting Jiujiu for the evening, she was all alone. It was at that time when an unbearable sense of emptiness would hit her. She could deal with loneliness, but the emptiness was slowly but surely eating away at her heart from the inside. If only Jiujiu and her other assistants were there, she could have avoided being swallowed up by it—even if that meant turning her back on Reijo's advice.

Shinshin had been resting its wings and relaxing at Jusetsu's feet, but it suddenly lifted its head. Jusetsu looked at the palace entrance in response. The bird then spread its wings and started making noise. With a gentle wave of her hand, Jusetsu opened the doors.

A visitor had arrived with a request for the Raven Consort.

Jusetsu now knew full well why all the Raven Consorts before her

consistently accepted requests from those who lived in the inner palace for so long—and the reason why was painful. They did it because they craved *connection*. They may not have even been sure of how they really felt, but that didn't matter. If the Raven Consort was forbidden from getting close to anyone, she could at least be of use to someone else. It didn't matter if the thread between them was just a delicate one—the Raven Consort just wanted to be connected to another person.

Before the visitor had a chance to say anything, the doors opened to reveal a flustered-looking court lady.

“Ra— Raven Consort. There's something I'd like to request of you...” she said falteringly.

“You may come in,” said Jusetsu, sitting down.

The court lady cautiously looked around the room and sat down opposite the Raven Consort. Judging by the way she was dressed, she had to be a lady-in-waiting at one of the palaces. Her ruqun was made of a high-quality silk. She also wore a white coral hanging ornament with a violet decorative cord attached to it from her belt.

“I'm a lady-in-waiting for the Crane Consort, at the Hakkaku Palace. My last name is Ki, and my first name is Senjo.”

That was how the lady-in-waiting introduced herself. She was a willowy, slim woman with a pale, oval face. Her body trembled slightly, and she kept her hands clasped together tightly in front of her chest.

“...And what do you want from me?” Jusetsu asked.

The lady-in-waiting quietly took in a breath. Hesitant to say anything, her eyes darted about the room before settling on Jusetsu and giving her an imploring gaze.

“There's a ghost,” she said.

Senjo's nails were digging into her clasped hands. She closed her eyes and exhaled—perhaps in an attempt to calm herself down—and repeated this action a few times. She touched the piece of white coral that hung from her belt. As she stroked it, Senjo finally managed to get her nerve back enough to start talking again.

“There's a ghost that only appears on rainy nights... It comes to my bedroom door. It doesn't knock or try to get in. Do you...have any idea why it might be appearing? I can hear its footsteps, and I hear it walking through the rain. I hear it pitter-patter over and stop outside

my door. When the rain is finished, all sign of it disappears except that it leaves a puddle outside the door. There's no way it can be a person. I couldn't help but try to get a look at it through the lattice window a few times. It was a black figure of a person, but I couldn't see what they looked like. They were right in front of me, but I still couldn't tell. All I could see were their feet, which donned long boots. The only other thing I could see was water dripping down from their robe, drip by drip. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make out their face. It was as if it was covered by a shadow."

After blurting out all of his information at once with a shaky voice, Senjo let out a deep sigh. Her narrow shoulders shuddered up and down. Her fingers ran over the white coral incessantly as she spoke, and continued to do so now that she was done. It seemed like the woman struggled to calm down without fiddling with something. Senjo appeared very nervous, but perhaps it was because the ghost was troubling. Her almond-shaped eyes would have looked captivating under normal circumstances, but now they were red and bloodshot.

Jusetsu gazed intently at Senjo. "When did this all start?"

"It started on my journey here to the capital, after I left my hometown. The ghost appeared the very first night that it rained."

"So it didn't begin after you came to the Hakkaku Palace, correct?"

"That's right. I used to be a lady-in-waiting for the Saname clan..."

"The Saname clan?"

"The family that Banka was born into. Don't you know about them?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Who is this 'Banka' you speak of?"

Senjo's eyes opened wide in shock. Then, perhaps having remembered that the Raven Consort was isolated from the rest of the world, she lowered her gaze. "My apologies. The Saname clan is a powerful family from Ga Province, which is a wealthy region. The clan came over from a land called Kakami long, long ago. They used to be lords who ruled over the entire province of Ga, but now they've distanced themselves from their governmental roles. They're powerful and own several manors. The Saname clan is no less rich than any affluent merchant family."

At that, Jusetsu remembered hearing that the Crane Consort came from a rich family when she visited the Hakkaku Palace before.

“Is Banka the Crane Consort?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“As foreign as her last name is, her first name sounds very local.”

“Banka’s name was humbly bestowed on her by His Majesty when she entered the inner palace. The Saname clan does not divulge their real names to outsiders, and it’s been that way for years and years. The head of the Saname clan—Banka’s father—goes by the name Choyo, but he was given that name by His Majesty when his daughter received hers.”

“I see. Banka... That name means ‘sunset,’ doesn’t it?”

It was a rather stylish name. *Who knew that man was capable of making such a tasteful choice?* Jusetsu thought to herself. A vision of Koshun’s wholly expressionless face popped into her head.

“Choyo was ecstatic. And then... You see...” Senjo trailed off and looked like she forgot what story she was telling.

“You were talking about when the ghost started appearing. You said it began once you left your hometown, and that you used to be a lady-in-waiting for the Saname clan.”

“Oh yes, that’s right. So, when I was with the Saname clan in Ga Province, there was nothing untoward. Then, it was decided that Banka would become one of the emperor’s consorts, and while we were on our way to the imperial capital, we got caught in the rain—that’s when it started. We were staying at an inn.” Senjo paused and shuddered as she thought back on that time. “I couldn’t sleep a wink that night, not even after the rain had stopped and the ghost had left. Even now, when it starts pouring after sunset, I’m beside myself with fear. Tonight was just the same...”

“It was raining until a little while ago, wasn’t it? Did the ghost come?”

Trembling, Senjo nodded. “Once the rain was over and I made sure the ghost was gone, I came right here. I couldn’t take it any longer. I thought that asking for your help was the only option I had left.”

“Do you want me to exorcize the ghost?” asked Jusetsu.

“Yes. I’d be so grateful if you could do that favor for me. I’ll give you something in return, so please...”

Jusetsu thought to herself for a moment. *A ghost that only appears on rainy nights?* “...There is something intriguing, though,” she said.

“What?” Senjo replied.

“The fact that the ghost doesn’t come in through the door is curious. The way it just stands there without doing anything.”

“Yes, but...” Senjo began. It sounded like she was trying to argue back, but Jusetsu raised her hand to stop her.

“Also, it’s interesting that the ghost *followed* you. I can’t imagine that it was here in the inner palace originally.”

The word “followed” made Senjo’s face turn as white as a sheet.

“I want to see where the ghost appears. I shall pay your room a visit tomorrow. And then...” Jusetsu stood up and collected a piece of hemp paper from her cabinet. “This is just to ease your mind, but I’m going to give you a talisman. It’ll protect you. It’s the kind that shamans hand out door-to-door, but it’ll stop weak ghosts from coming close to you.”

Senjo bowed appreciatively as she took the defense charm from Jusetsu. It had strange lettering written on it in ink.

“Do you have any idea whose ghost it could be?”

Jusetsu’s question made Senjo fumble over her words for a moment, but the woman ultimately nodded. “I do,” she said.

Then—clutching the talisman against her chest—she scurried out of the coal-black palace building.

Jiujiu was noisy from the moment she started work in the morning. She chattered away incessantly as she brought over the water basin for Jusetsu to wash her face in and didn’t stop even when she was preparing breakfast. It was all incoherent rambling, and she sounded like a little bird chirping away. She talked about how it wasn’t going to rain today because the winter wren was flying high in the sky, so it was fine weather for doing laundry...and then followed it up with how the rice cakes that were left in the kitchen were going moldy.

“Where I come from, they used to say that if the fishing star

looked dim, that meant it was going to rain,” Ishiha chimed in as he helped her with the breakfast preparations.

“They don’t say that in this area. It’s probably because we don’t usually look up at the night sky. People close their doors at nighttime, after all.”

Ishiha’s hometown was a small fishing village. For those who fished for a living, the stars were important signposts for directions.

“It’s very important for us to know the location of the stars and when they appear,” he said.

Jiujiu was surprised. “It doesn’t sound like your clan is frightened of the night, then. Aren’t they scared that Yeyoushen might come out?”

“They still are. That’s why they put on skin protection and avoid going fishing on nights when there isn’t any starlight. If it’s pitch-black at night, people fear that a monster will drag their boat from atop the waves down into the depths of the sea.”

Ishiha’s hometown tales were fascinating. Things were so different there compared to the imperial capital. Jusetsu had never actually seen the sea with her own eyes and had only ever witnessed it through the Raven’s eyes on the nights that it escaped—nights when there was a new moon out.

“The sea must be really frightening,” Jusetsu murmured softly as she scooped up some gruel with her spoon.

Ishiha laughed cheerfully, making crinkles appear on his suntanned skin. “It is, but it’s warm too. It’s like a baby’s cradle.”

“A baby’s cradle? What do you mean?”

“The waves. They swing away from you, and then they come back again. The sea is like one big cradle.” Ishiha mimed rocking a baby. “Also, it *needs* to be frightening. If it wasn’t, people would underestimate it. The fact that it’s scary is just right.”

“Did an older man from your village tell you that too?”

“He did. He taught me about the sea, about the stars... He taught me so many different things.”

That man must’ve been like Reijo was to me, Jusetsu thought to herself. She blew on the gruel to cool it down. It was piping hot and was made with snow fungus and citron daylily. If it wasn’t cool enough,

she'd get burned. She did wish her food was allowed to cool a little more before it was typically brought to her, but Keishi, her elderly servant, wouldn't compromise on this.

"Food cools down by the second, so it needs to be served hot," she'd insist.

Once it was finally the right temperature to eat, Jusetsu brought the spoon to her mouth. The crunchy fungus in it was her favorite. The pine nuts sprinkled on top of the gruel were aromatic, and nutritious too. Keishi still saw Jusetsu as the poor, tiny child she once was, and even now, the food she served her was all incredibly nourishing.

"Do you have any plans for today, niangniang?" Jiujiu asked.

Jusetsu's usual response was, "Not really," but today, however, was different.

"I'm going to the Hakkaku Palace."

"Oh, a trip out? It's been a while," responded Jiujiu, her voice suddenly sounding very enthusiastic. "In that case, it would be a wonderful opportunity for you to wear the robe that Hua niangniang gave you. That lilac, raw silk shanqun with a pink belt... Your crystal hairpin would look lovely with that."

The way she spoke was fitting of a competent lady-in-waiting.

"It's nothing I need to get particularly dressed up for," Jusetsu warned her, but Jiujiu was too excited to listen to her words. *Never mind*, Jusetsu thought. It looked like the young woman was in a good mood, so she easily gave up. Jiujiu enjoyed dressing Jusetsu up in fanciful outfits. Usually, Jusetsu just wore a raven-black robe, so her typical outfit must have been boring for her.

Once she finished her breakfast, Jiujiu helped her change clothes. The colorful robe was indeed a gift from Hua niangniang—the Mandarin Duck Consort, Un Kajo. Kajo babied Jusetsu like she was her own little sister. No matter how much Jusetsu insisted she didn't want more clothing, Kajo kept having robes made to give to her. Time and time again, Jusetsu would find herself unable to turn them down point-blank and she'd end up reluctantly accepting them.

Why did the people around her never listen to anything she said?

Jusetsu stood frozen to the spot as Jiujiu deliberated over belts and hairpins until she was satisfied.

“Not that one. And not this one either...” Jiujiu tried one item on Jusetsu before swapping it for another.

Jusetsu knew that if she made any comments, things would drag on for even longer, so she kept quiet. Once Jiujiu had put a pale red crystal hairpin and golden dangling hair decorations in place, she finally looked content.

“Am I ready now?” Jusetsu checked.

“Indeed you are.” Jiujiu nodded, looking far too pleased with herself. Kogyo had been standing behind Jusetsu to help dress her, and she shook with laughter at the sight.

Jusetsu left Ishiha to care for Shinshin and left the Yamei Palace with Jiujiu accompanying her. For some reason, Shinshin had taken a liking to Ishiha and grown very attached to him—which was odd, considering how difficult the bird usually was. Jusetsu remembered how the Owl had called Shinshin something else—Harara. Was that its real name?

As she walked through the woodlands that surrounded the Yamei Palace, Jusetsu looked up at the treetops. A bird was cawing from its perch up above. It had brown wings with white speckles—a star raven. Jusetsu had previously assumed that this bird would disappear at the same time that Shogetsu had burst into feathers and scattered, but this bird had actually kept living in this woodland.

She remembered him saying the bird was an apparatus that the Raven used.

Was that why it stayed in this area? Jusetsu couldn’t discern what this star raven—Sumaru—was thinking through its gaze.

They continued through the wooded area and headed for the northern part of the inner palace. Onkei, Jusetsu’s bodyguard, had to be watching out for Jusetsu from somewhere in the shadows again. As a result, she wasn’t being all that cautious as she walked along. There were lots of trees growing throughout the inner palace, along with blooming flowers, waterways, and sturdy mud walls. Sunlight reflected off the tiled roofs of the palace buildings like shimmering waves.

Just as Jiujiu had said, it didn’t look like it was going to rain today. That must have been a relief for Senjo as well.

“What do you need from the Hakkaku Palace?” Jiujiu asked as

they went down an alley between some roofed mud walls.

“It’s to do with a request I’ve received.”

“Oh my. You *did* have a visitor last night, after all. You slept in quite late this morning, so I had a sneaking suspicion.” Jiujiu pouted and sulked a bit. “You see, this is why I keep saying that I should stay up later too.”

“I never know when someone like that is going to visit. Staying up late just in case somebody *does* arrive would be pointless. You’re all early to rise.”

“But...” Jiujiu seemed unconvinced.

Jusetsu knew that if she continued, it would just result in her being backed into a corner. She changed the subject instead. “Do you know the Hakkaku Palace consort?” Jusetsu asked.

“Oh, was it the Crane Consort who visited last night? No, I’ve never seen her.”

“It was actually her lady-in-waiting,” said Jusetsu. “You might not have met her, but do you know anything about her?”

Jiujiu shook her head. “Not really. The Hakkaku Palace isn’t of a particularly high rank in the inner palace, so I believe it’s on the outskirts. I’ve never even heard that many rumors about it. The consort is a rich young lady from Ga Province, I think. The youngest daughter of a prominent old family or something—but I’ve heard that she’s generous. She’s not stuck-up like you’d imagine the daughter of a distinguished family would be.”

Jusetsu had also heard that she was generous with her ladies-in-waiting. She gave them quality pieces of fabric, hairpins, and all sorts of things that she didn’t need anymore. Even Senjo had been dressed in a rather luxurious-looking robe.

“I’ve heard that when the position of Magpie Consort is open, either the Crane Consort or the Swallow Concubine can be promoted to it—although out of the two of them, the Swallow Concubine seems more likely to get that promotion...”

Jusetsu said nothing in reply. Remembering what happened to the Magpie Consort still made her feel remorseful. The image of the woman being bitten in the neck and her blood spraying up into the air flashed in the back of Jusetsu’s mind.

Jiujiu seemingly sensed how Jusetsu was feeling and hurriedly changed the topic. “Oh, niangniang—that reminds me. We have those peaches that His Majesty gave you the other day. When we get back to the Yamei Palace, I’ll peel them for you to eat.”

“I’m perfectly capable of peeling peaches myself.”

“Won’t your hands get sticky?” protested Jiujiu. “Ishiha gets his whole face covered in sticky residue. It’s terrible!”

“That’s because he’s a child. He can’t help it,” Jusetsu replied with a giggle. Ishiha wasn’t used to eating fruit, so he ended up getting it all over himself. Even she had to admit that the sight of him with sticky fruit juice around his mouth was quite cute.

A row of juniper hedges came into view as they continued and arrived at the Hakkaku Palace. The palace buildings’ roof tiles were decorated with cranes. Jusetsu went around to the back entrance of the building, the way she entered when she came here previously. There were some court ladies drying robes right by it, just as there had been last time. One of them remembered her and a look of surprise appeared on her face.

“There’s a lady-in-waiting I’d like you to call over for me,” Jusetsu said to her.

“Aren’t you that court lady from the Yamei Palace...?” she said, tilting her head suspiciously. “You’re not dressed as such today.”

Jusetsu felt it would be a nuisance to reply, so she ignored her comment. She simply said, “Call the lady-in-waiting named Ki Senjo over for me. If you tell her I came from the Yamei Palace, she’ll understand.”

However, before that court lady could leave to call the woman over, Jusetsu heard footsteps running over to her.

“Raven Consort.” It was Senjo, gasping for breath. “I’ve been waiting for you. I didn’t expect you to come in from the back entrance.”

It sounded like she was eagerly awaiting Jusetsu’s arrival at the front door instead. The court lady looked from Senjo to Jusetsu, who was just referred to as the “Raven Consort.” Her eyes suddenly widened.

Likewise, the court ladies who were drying robes inside started whispering to each other in hushed tones. They had fear in their eyes. They were afraid of the Raven Consort, the woman who lived a quiet

life in her raven-black palace building deep inside the inner palace. The building was darker than even the darkest of nights. The consort was rumored to take on tasks varying from locating lost items to carrying out curse killings.

However, Jusetsu sensed that the gaze of one of these women was different. Jusetsu glanced in the direction it was coming from. One of the court ladies standing a short distance away from the others was staring right at her. The emotion in her eyes wasn't fear, but something else that Jusetsu didn't know how to describe. It wasn't fondness, but it wasn't hatred either. If she was pushed to definite it, the gaze felt urgent. Could that woman also have something she wanted the Raven Consort's help with?

"This way, Raven Consort," Senjo said, guiding her toward a palace building.

She led her to a palace building beside the one in the center, the one that looked to be the one where the consort herself resided. Senjo explained that this other building was home to many of the Crane Consort's ladies-in-waiting, and across the courtyard was the bedchamber that was used when the emperor visited. Flowers known as eightfold gardenias were blooming in the courtyard. Those white blossoms were as distinct and bright as summer clouds, and they had a strong scent to them as well. They were so stark white, and their scent was so strong that even in the dark of night, you'd be able to tell what they were.

"There used to be some peonies planted there," Senjo explained, having followed Jusetsu's line of sight. "However, I think His Majesty ordered for the garden to be redone. It must have been painful for him, being reminded of his mother."

That was because Koshun's mother was the previous emperor's Crane Consort.

Jusetsu's reply was simple. "I see," she said, and averted her gaze from the garden.

Senjo's bedroom was in the corner of the palace building. It had one door and a lattice window that faced the outer passage. However, once Jusetsu was inside, she discovered that there was actually a second door and window at the back—and it was on *that* side that the ghost was appearing. Jusetsu opened that door and stepped outside. Outside the back entrance, it was dark, shady, and cold. There were some trees

planted there, but they seemed to only make it even gloomier. Jusetsu then stared down at the ground beneath the leaves—where the ghost would apparently stand.

She *definitely* sensed something. A subtle trace of a ghostly presence was lingering there.

Unfortunately, it wasn't quite that simple...

"What do you think, Raven Consort?" Senjo's apprehensive voice came from inside the room.

Jusetsu turned around to face her. "I have no doubt that a ghost has been here."

Senjo went pale and pressed her hand to her chest. Jusetsu took a step back and pulled a peony flower out of her updo. She blew across it, and the flower immediately turned into smoke and wavered about as it spread throughout the area like a thin curtain.

Before long, the figure of a person appeared on the other side of the smoke. At first, it was a somewhat vague apparition, but it gradually became more distinct. A clear outline of the person's face took shape, and their empty eyes and lips appeared. Their lips were bluish and drained of blood, and they were hanging open slightly. The deathly pale face they belonged to was one of a man in his twenties or so, and his topknot was disheveled. Half of the loose hair had fallen onto his forehead. There was no light behind his sunken eye sockets.

A puddle had formed at his feet, and Jusetsu could hear the *pit-a-pat* of water dripping. However...instead of being a puddle of water, it was red. Something red—blood—was dripping down from the hem of the man's robe. The man had been slashed from the base of his neck to his chest with a single stroke. Fresh blood poured out of his neck and flowed down his body, spreading from one area to another. The blood had stained his robe and the excess dripped onto the ground.

Senjo let out a piercing, feeble shriek at the sight and collapsed.

Jusetsu blew on the smoke and made the figure disappear. She hurried over to Senjo and found that, luckily, the woman hadn't lost consciousness. Together with Jiujiu, she helped Senjo onto a lounge chair and got her to sit.

"That was...Saku Hashu," Senjo said, her own face a shade of bluish white. Her voice was shaky and shrill. Senjo's breathing was

ragged, so Jusetsu rubbed her back and encouraged her to take some deep breaths. After taking two, then three deep breaths out and in, some color returned to Senjo's face. She clutched onto her white coral belt decoration tight.

A court lady was called to bring her some water. After she drank it and had calmed down, she said again, "That ghost was Saku Hashu..." The woman's voice still trembled.

"Is he an acquaintance of yours?" Jusetsu asked.

"Hashu... He was my fiancé. We were neighbors. We grew up together and were friends for years... Well, I say he was my fiancé, but it wasn't that kind of formal affair where you don't even know what each other look like until he lifts the bride's veil at the wedding ceremony. We knew each other well." Senjo told her story bit by bit, occasionally finding herself at a loss for words. "In the region we're from, it's customary to visit the shrine of the local god to announce your marriage prior to the ceremony. Three years ago, we set off to visit that shrine. I was accompanied by my mother and an attendant, and Hashu was accompanied by his parents and an attendant of his own. It takes two full days to get to the shrine in the mountains and back again, so it is a bit of a pleasure jaunt too. Visitors to the shrine get off their horses at the base of the mountain and make the rest of the journey by foot, or by use of a palanquin. Hashu was a strong walker, but the rest of the party were either women or elderly, so we opted to go by palanquin. That...was the wrong choice."

Senjo paused and let out a sigh of deep regret.

"Hashu's parents got on the first one, followed by my mother, and then myself. Our attendants followed Hashu's parents' palanquin and the one my mother was on by foot. Hashu walked alongside mine. We were going up a mountain path, so the palanquin carriers were walking at a slow and unhurried pace. For a while, everything was fine, but it wasn't long before rain started to pour. The rain got heavier and heavier, and I couldn't even see the palanquins ahead of me anymore. It just seemed like mine was gradually lagging further and further behind. Hashu became suspicious and urged the palanquin carriers to hurry up, but both of them just gave a vague reply. He couldn't get anywhere with them. I'd heard that some palanquin carriers were imprudent fellows who threatened customers, charging exorbitant prices or mugging them, but I *never* expected that I'd come across such bad

palanquin carriers myself. I was so sure to pick the most homely-looking, honest-seeming young men I could find when it came to hiring them... Anyway, they deemed Hashu and I to be easy targets since we didn't have any attendants with us who could serve as bodyguards. Now that the rain was pouring down, they were finally baring their fangs. They tossed us out of the palanquin and held us at knifepoint, demanding money and valuables. If that was all they wanted, then Hashu might have complied, but they...tried to kidnap me... And that's why Hashu..."

Hashu had fought back.

"He held down the palanquin carriers and told me to run away. He told me to chase down the palanquins that my mother and the others were riding in and ask for help. They couldn't be that far ahead, he insisted. I ran. The ground was muddy from the rain, so I ended up getting stuck and fell over multiple times. I never hated the rain as much as I did in those moments. By the time I got help and made my way back, Hashu already..." Senjo choked on her words. She took a breath in, and in a hoarse voice, said, "He was dead."

The palanquin carriers had run away from the scene, but they apparently had been caught by a policeman immediately afterward. Having mugged and killed someone, they naturally were sentenced to death. At this point, they had long since been executed.

"I...don't know what would have happened to me if Hashu hadn't let me get away at that moment. I can't believe that he didn't manage to get over to paradise... He ended up roaming about as a ghost..." Senjo covered her face with her sleeve at that.

However, the fact that he was murdered meant that it wasn't especially surprising to Jusetsu that he'd ended up as a ghost. *She must have had some vague inkling it was him*, she thought. When she asked Senjo if she had any idea who it could have been the night before, the woman hesitated to answer the question. Was it because she didn't want to consider the possibility that her fiancé was now a ghost?

Still, that spirit...

Jusetsu headed over to the doorway again and stared outside. "No ghosts appeared when you were in your hometown, did they? And the ghost doesn't come in this door."

Senjo looked behind her and nodded. "That's right," she said.

“There’s one thing I can say for certain, then,” said Jusetsu, pointing at the doorway. “That ghost is an apparatus.”

“An apparatus...?” repeated Senjo, cocking her head to one side.

“Someone is making it come and visit you. To put it plainly, his ghost is being used as a tool. A tool for a curse.”

Senjo’s eyes bulged out in surprise. “A c-curse?”

“I can tell that right away by the traces of magic that are left behind. That said, I don’t know *who* placed the curse, or what their objective might be. A curse as long-winded as this one—where the ghost doesn’t possess or kill the victim and simply stands outside their bedroom when it rains instead... It’s pointless. I can’t understand what the perpetrator is trying to do.”

Jusetsu frowned. At this point, it just seemed like the other person was just trying to scare Senjo.

“Reversing a curse is simple—but doing so before their intentions are clear isn’t a very good plan. Reversing a curse of this level wouldn’t kill whoever did it, and in fact, it might spur them to place yet another curse. Can you think of anyone who’d be likely to do this?”

Senjo shook her head vigorously.

“In that case, we’ll need to do a bit more investigating,” Jusetsu said.

“Investigating?”

“I’ll need to look into your connections.”

“What...?” said Senjo, looking nervous. “Are you saying that the person who placed the curse is somebody I know?”

“If they didn’t have anything to do with you, then they wouldn’t have placed a curse on you. The fact that they’re probably nearby will make them easier to find.”

Senjo cowered her neck and looked around. “Wh-what am I supposed to do?”

“Think again if there’s anybody you know who might place a curse on you. Or if there’s anyone around you who would be capable of doing such a thing.”

“I will...” Senjo said, nodding nervously.

“I’ll start by surrounding your room with a spiritual barrier. It doesn’t seem like the ghost is able to get inside at the moment, but it’s best to have one in place just in case it tries to.”

“All right...” Senjo seemed a little relieved and placed her hand over her chest.

Jusetsu pulled a rod with thread wrapped around it out of her breast pocket. She used it to pull the thread around the room, from corner to corner.

“This kind of magic was originally used by shamans... My sort of magic isn’t suitable for these cheap tricks, you see,” Jusetsu murmured as she trained the thread along the floor.

In principle, this was the same as the spiritual barrier she put in place at the Jakuso Palace. Shaman magic and the skills the Raven Consort had weren’t as similar as they looked—but sometimes, they were more alike than it seemed. Perhaps they’d started off the same...or maybe they were entirely different.

Jusetsu tied the ends of the thread together in front of the doorway.

“This should do the trick,” said Jusetsu.

Once she’d stood up, Senjo thanked her repeatedly.

“It won’t fix the crux of the issue, though.” Jusetsu backpedaled, bewildered by Senjo’s gratitude.

“That doesn’t matter,” Senjo said, shaking her head. “The fact that it won’t be able to come in is enough of a relief that will let me sleep at night.”

“I see...” Jusetsu stared at Senjo’s pale face.

What could anybody gain from placing a curse on a lady as fragile and powerless as this?

She couldn’t work out what the curse-placer’s goal could be. Curses placed burdens on the person who had placed them to varying degrees. Depending on how severe the curse was, they could even lose their lives if the curse was reversed. The more powerful that the person who reversed the curse was, the greater the danger the perpetrator had put themselves in. There weren’t many advantages to this pursuit.

Could the perpetrator have been a shaman who felt he was

invincible?

Still, she couldn't understand would why someone like that would target a mere lady-in-waiting like Senjo. It would have made more sense if their victim had been a person of status instead, like Koshun.

The more Jusetsu thought about it, the deeper the frown lines in her forehead became.

The situation smelled like trouble—and she knew her instincts were usually right.

Jusetsu left the room, planning on simply returning to the Yamei Palace—but as she was walking along the outer passage, a group of people caught her attention.

“Oh,” exclaimed Senjo quietly before scurrying to the side. The sight of them seemed to have panicked her. “It’s the Crane Consort,” she warned Jusetsu gently.

“Is it?” said Jusetsu. She gazed at the young girl who had several ladies-in-waiting following her from behind.

Calling her a “young girl” was more than fair. She wasn’t anything like the elegant, adult women consorts that Jusetsu had met before.

She’s like a butterfly, Jusetsu thought at first glance. The Crane Consort was so light on her feet that it seemed as if she was flitting around from flower to flower, not placing any weight on the ground below her.

Her dark purple skirt with silver embroidery fluttered about, allowing her silver shoes to peek out from underneath. The young girl’s glossy black hair was tied back into two loops with several strands hanging down loose. Her coal-black eyes glistened like sunlight shimmering on the surface of the water.

She was a butterfly that fluttered about on her beautiful wings—but she was also a butterfly that was unafraid to show interest in people she didn’t know.

The Crane Consort’s big eyes were staring right at Jusetsu.

“Hey, you. Is it true you’re the Raven Consort?”

Even her voice was light and airy. She stood in front of Jusetsu and gawked at her with dark eyes, not showing a hint of hesitation. She

was a little taller than Jusetsu, but the two of them were probably around the same age.

“You’re like a little bird,” the Crane Consort declared after taking more than enough time to observe her. “You know those willow tit birds? You look so much like one, you know?”

Koshun had told her the same thing. He said they looked alike too. Was it really that uncanny?

“Their heads are black, and their bodies are white. When the sun shines on their wings, they look silver. They’re so beautiful. And I *love* silver.”

With that, she narrowed her eyes.

Jusetsu knitted her brows slightly in return. She wasn’t saying this because she knew Jusetsu’s hair was silver, was she?

The Crane Consort’s shoes were covered in silver embroidery, and the pins that were placed in her tied-up hair were silver as well. Most consorts tended to wear golden hairpins instead, so these were unusual. Perhaps she just liked the color.

“Senjo had a request for you, didn’t she? She’s been low on energy lately, so I’ve been worried about her too. Since it’s a ghost that’s troubling her, we can’t even use *money* to bribe it to leave, yeah? It’s tough—the regular rules of the world don’t apply to it. You know what I mean?” The Crane Consort tilted her head to one side slightly, requesting affirmation.

“Ghosts aren’t the only ones that the regular rules of the world don’t apply to though, are they?” Jusetsu replied.

“Oh, is that right? You remind me of my father.”

“What?” said Jusetsu. She had been the spitting image of a willow tit just a moment prior.

“Yeah. He’s calm, like you.”

Her point must be that my physical appearance reminds her of a willow tit, whereas my attitude is similar to her father’s, Jusetsu deduced. Still, she couldn’t think of a way to respond to that kind of comment, so she kept quiet.

“What’s your name, Raven Consort?”

“It’s...Ryu Jusetsu,” Jusetsu replied.

“Jusetsu, then. My name is Banka. That’s the name His Majesty gave me.”

Jusetsu already knew that, and she gave her a slight nod.

Banka continued. “Would you like to have some tea with me? Since you’re already here, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

What could that be? Jusetsu wondered. *Does it have to do with a ghost?* She couldn’t quite figure this young girl out.

“I’ll have to decline,” said Jusetsu flatly with a wave of her sleeve. “I was just about to go home.”

It didn’t seem like talking to Banka was going to give her any clues about the curse. She felt like it would be a better idea to go around and asking her ladies-in-waiting for information later. She glanced at the attendants standing behind Banka. None of them were behaving particularly unusually. They were wearing robes of fine quality, but so was Senjo. Some of them were also wearing the same white coral belt decorations as she did. Perhaps it was the style those days?

Banka watched Jusetsu hurriedly make her way out, tilting her head slightly to one side in curiosity as she did so.

“Raven Consort... Raven Consort?”

As Jusetsu was about to leave through the same back gate to the Hakkaku Palace as she’d come in through, a court lady called out to her to get her to stop. When she looked at the court lady’s face, she realized that it was the same woman who was staring intently at her when she first arrived, looking as if there was something she wanted to say. She was a short young girl with dry, red cheeks that seemed to fit her quite well.

“Umm...” she began timidly in a feeble yet clear voice, “Until recently, I was a court lady at the Jakuso Palace.”

“The Jakuso Palace...”

After the Magpie Consort’s death, the court ladies, eunuchs, and other staff who worked there were appointed to posts elsewhere. The gates to the Jakuso had been shut, and the place was deserted now.

“I was the one who lent the Magpie Consort my court lady robe.”

This unexpected confession made Jusetu's eyes widen with surprise. *That robe...* The Magpie Consort had worn a court lady ruqun when she snuck out to visit Jusetu. *So that's where she got it from.*

"Back then...I knew that something was troubling the Magpie Consort, and that she was hurting. And yet all I did was stay quiet and lend her my robe..." The girl's voice was thin and shaky. "Day by day, she appeared to grow weaker. Even when she was awake, she seemed like she was wandering around in a dream... We court ladies should have told somebody when we noticed how strangely she was acting..." She drooped her head. "But we didn't."

Jusetu could sense a festering remorse oozing out of her. She watched at the young girl carefully—and her eyelashes seemed to tremble as she cast her gaze downward.

After a pause, Jusetu spoke up. "Every one of us has our own role to play in life. People say, 'know your place,' but...you were nowhere near powerful enough to save the Magpie Consort. When we reflect on what's done and gone, we feel like we were capable of a lot more than we actually were, but that's not all that true."

This was true for Jusetu as well. She looked down at her own hands. She knew what she was actually capable of accomplishing, but even she couldn't avoid the regret that perhaps she could have done more.

"You'd be better off holding a memorial service for her than lamenting over what happened. That will help ensure that the Magpie Consort's soul reaches the other side of the sea and eventually crosses the river of stars, where it will then become a healthy new life." Jusetu then had another thought—*prayer could be used to scoop up any uncontrollable thoughts she's having*. "You should try praying for her as well."

The girl looked up at Jusetu with tears in her eyes and nodded slowly. "Thank you very much. I'm glad that she had you, Raven Consort. I'm sure she appreciated you too." With that, the young girl's tormented expression softened, and she returned to the area where she was working.

"It's a good thing that you paid this palace a visit today, wasn't it, niangniang?" said Jiujiu, standing by Jusetu's side. "I think you made that girl feel a lot better."

“I didn’t say anything special...”

“It didn’t *need* to be anything special, niangniang. That girl hoped you’d listen to what she had to say, and you found something to say that would help her. That was all she wanted.”

“Is that right...?”

Jusetsu...or rather, the Raven Consort, wasn’t somebody of any real importance. Despite that, were her words really enough to relieve some people from their suffering?

Night fell and the gray clouds in the sky began to thicken. It was a very humid night without even the slightest breeze in the air, so there was a chance that some rain was on its way. Jusetsu sat on her window ledge, leisurely fanning herself with a fan. A moist, warm draft brushed against her cheeks. The darkness outside her window was thicker than it was dark, more like a cakey mud that had settled at the bottom of the ocean.

Through that mud, however, a small light was flickering in the distance. Jusetsu stopped fanning herself when she noticed it.

“Is it His Majesty?” Jiujiu asked, having noticed Jusetsu’s reaction. She was quick to spot little things like that. “I should get some tea ready.”

“I doubt he’ll want tea on a night as muggy as this.” Jusetsu sounded aghast as Jiujiu went to rush over to the kitchen.

“I’ll peel those peaches and serve them to you instead. They’ve been chilled in the well.”

“Don’t you think he might be bringing something himself?”

“Oh, that’s true,” remarked Jiujiu. “I wonder what he’ll have with him tonight.”

Just as Jusetsu predicted, Koshun’s assistant Eisei was carrying a basket with something in it for him. It was a sweet gourd, and the emperor explained that it had been given to him as an offering.

“It’s from To Province,” he said. “Gourds are the best thing to eat in the summer months.”

Despite saying that, Koshun didn’t look like the heat was bothering him too much. His “expression”—for lack of a better word—

was so lacking in emotion it was hard to tell whether he was feeling unwell or not.

Still, when Jusetsu saw the loose robe he was wearing, she realized that the heat must have been getting to him after all. The light indigo robe made of raw silk definitely looked like it would keep him cool.

“Gourds are good because they pull the heat out from your body,” Jusetsu said after sitting down opposite the emperor. “When it’s all muggy like this and you don’t sweat, the heat gets trapped inside you.”

“Is that right?” Koshun asked calmly. “I’m glad I brought it then.”

His voice was as quiet and unperturbed as always. It reminded Jusetsu of an imperturbable mountain in the wintertime.

Jiujiu sliced the gourd and brought it over. As Koshun brought a piece to his mouth, he gently introduced a new topic of conversation.

“I heard you went to the Hakkaku Palace,” he said. Jusetsu figured that Onkei or someone similar probably reported it to him. “Did you find yourself in any danger?”

Koshun seemed somewhat worried about Jusetsu as of late, after all that had happened with the Magpie Consort and the Owl.

“No,” said Jusetsu. “At least, I don’t think so.” The curse in question came to her mind regardless. *I suppose I’d be lying if I said there was definitely nothing untoward*, Jusetsu thought to herself.

Koshun glared at her. “Don’t you think you should take on another bodyguard?” he asked.

“Bodyguards might be excellent swordsmen, but none of them are able to use shaman magic. There are times when there’s nothing that they can do,” she refuted.

“My grandfather...I mean, the Flame Emperor drove all of the shamans out,” said Koshun. “Still, it’s better to have a sword than not.”

In truth, swords and arrows were more effective against Shogetsu than anything else. The fact that Onkei was her only bodyguard made her scared of how things might end up if the worst were to happen. It wasn’t that she was afraid of an imminent danger—she was afraid that she’d have to sacrifice him to protect herself. Still, she wasn’t sure about adding yet another person to her inner circle.

She put a piece of white gourd in her mouth. She crushed it between her teeth and refreshingly sweet juice came pouring out.

“...Just one,” she said. “If you could send me one more skilled man to fill the role, I’d greatly appreciate it.”

Once she took someone in to be by her side, she needed to hire somebody else to protect that person. Her assistants were steadily growing in numbers. That was just how it worked, and it was why Reijo warned her so harshly against it. She didn’t *need* a lady-in-waiting. She wasn’t *supposed* to have eunuchs. The Raven Consort was meant to be alone.

If she had more people around her, they’d become the Raven Consort’s shields and swords. They’d be the Raven Consort’s—or even, the Winter Sovereign’s—fortress, whether she liked it or not.

Logically speaking, she understood this—and yet Jusetsu didn’t have the heart to just drop everything and everyone around her anymore.

I’m weak, Jusetsu thought. I’ve grown weak.

She didn’t know what to do.

“Send me someone from the Bridle House. Even military officers are no real competition for those men,” she said.

They were a team of eunuchs who were tough on crime in the inner palace. They were permitted to carry swords, and the organization was under the direct control of the emperor. When Jusetsu was attacked by Shogetsu, the Bridle House proved to be of great help.

“I wonder who a good choice would be,” said Koshun. He glanced back at Eisei, who was standing in wait behind him.

“How about Tankai?” Eisei suggested. “I expect he and Onkei would get along well.” The eunuch had an icy look on his face as he replied to the emperor. He always seemed to be in a bad mood when Jusetsu was before him.

Koshun gave a light nod to show he agreed. Then, he looked over at Jusetsu. “I’ll send him your way as early as tomorrow.”

“I’ve heard the Crane Consort is from Ga Province,” Jusetsu said, changing the subject.

“She is. She’s the youngest daughter of the Saname clan,

which is...”

“I’ve already been told about them. I heard they’re a wealthy clan who came over from Kakami.”

“Well, they actually arrived in these parts a very long time ago—back when Ikahi Island still existed.”

Long, long ago, there was an island called Ikahi Island that sat in between the lands of Sho and Kakami. Numerous boats from both countries would use it as a way-stop, whether they were coming or going for private or official purposes. However, at some point, the island sank, and travel between the two islands became much less frequent.

“Ga Province is a good region. It’s surrounded by mountains, has fertile plains, and it has a port too. Recently, its silkworm-raising industry has been booming, and you can get good raw silk from there. It’s a little way away from the imperial capital, but as long as you use the waterways, cargo can get here in no time,” he explained.

The inner parts of the island of Sho were very mountainous, so the routes leading to the imperial capital were all waterways. The previous dynasty had created waterways linking the rivers together, so the journey now took far fewer days than it used to.

“If the province can create good-quality raw silk, I’m sure they’ll have good business relationships with other countries too, rather than just supplying it to the imperial capital,” Jusetsu said casually.

Her comment made Koshun raise his eyebrows slightly.

If there were complicated circumstances involved, Jusetsu realized she’d rather not discuss them. She put another piece of gourd in her mouth and changed the subject. “Word has it that you were the one who gave Banka her name.”

“That’s right. In the Saname clan, people don’t reveal their real names to others, not even their siblings. Apparently, parents are the only ones who know someone’s name.”

“That sounds like the parents are controlling,” Jusetsu remarked. To know someone’s name was to have control over them. *Perhaps parents have more authority than usual in the Saname clan*, Jusetsu considered.

“I do hear that they have great respect for their elders,” the

emperor said. "Did you meet the Crane Consort?"

"I did."

"How was it?"

"What do you mean, putting it like that?" she asked.

"I don't like her, personally."

"Oh?" Jusetsu asked with surprise. She stared intently at Koshun—it was unusual of him to make such an undiplomatic comment. "I didn't interact with her for long enough to make a proper assessment. I did think she seemed nice, however."

"She's not a bad person. It's just... I can never tell how she really feels," he admitted.

"Isn't it the same with everyone?" asked Jusetsu. Still, she did sort of understand where Koshun was coming from. Banka was particularly hard to figure out. Jusetsu couldn't tell what the Crane Consort thought of her—or whether the young girl liked her or not.

"The Crane Consort's father is the same way. The Saname clan are not the chiefs of the province, nor do they hold any central governmental posts, but they are essentially the rulers of Ga Province. Generally speaking, they aren't on good terms with the powerful clans that are native to the region, or with officials who were dispatched there from the central government. Well, that much goes without saying, at least. And yet the Crane Consort's *father* seems to be doing well for himself. There are signs here and there that officials are being won over by him. Anyway, if you're going to be frequenting the Hakkaku Palace, you should watch your step."

Did he choose the daughter of somebody he's wary of as a consort on purpose? Jusetsu wondered. In other words, the young girl was being held for political reasons.

Was Banka actually a hostage to keep the Saname clan in check?

Koshun was speaking calmly, but it was impossible to determine how he was actually feeling deep down. He and Banka's father seemed like they could be two of a kind.

"Now that you mention it, Banka told me I reminded her of her father," Jusetsu said.

Koshun cocked his head slightly at that. "I wouldn't say so."

“Not in how we look, but she said that in we’re similar in how we’re both calm people.”

“Really...?” Koshun looked even more doubtful.

“She also said that my appearance resembles that of a willow tit. You once told me the same thing, did you not?”

“...A willow tit. Did she really say that?” Koshun asked. He frowned slightly.

“She did.”

Koshun looked displeased and fell silent. Jusetsu wondered if he was thinking about the willow tit’s silver wings.

He spoke again after a pause. “Wasn’t the request you received from one of her ladies-in-waiting?”

“Yes. A ghost has been visiting her.”

Koshun gazed at Jusetsu’s face. “Don’t you find all this painful?” he asked.

Jusetsu blinked at him in response, not understanding what he meant.

Koshun abruptly lowered his gaze and appeared to search for the right words to say. “Don’t...you find it painful that all your life consists of is listening to visitor’s requests?”

He was talking about the circumstances of the Raven Consort.

A bitter smile came across Jusetsu’s lips. “It’s a bit late to be bringing that up, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I believe the timing is appropriate.” He was asking her this now because of what the Owl had said.

“That still doesn’t change anything...” Jusetsu replied. “You’re not allowed to do anything about it.”

The Winter Sovereign needed to exist to preserve public peace on the island of Sho. The Raven Consort was forbidden from appearing in public as the Winter Sovereign. She was unable to leave the imperial estate and was forced to live out her life within its confines. And on every new moon, she was forced to experience the pain of her body being torn apart.

Koshun was silent—appearing to be brooding over something—

but Jusetsu didn't say anything more. Instead, she turned her head toward the lattice window and simply stared out into the darkness.

In the past, she may have felt angered by Koshun's kindness—but now, his words quietly and calmly soaked into her heart like drops of rain.

This was even more painful.

Just before he left to return home, Koshun glanced at Jusetsu's belt.

"I see you're wearing it."

Jusetsu had the wooden fish-shaped belt decoration Koshun made for her hanging from her waist. Its tail was slightly chipped, but Jusetsu wore it regardless. It was damaged when Koshun shielded her from the Owl's sword.

She looked down at the model fish as well and fiddled with it between her fingertips. She found it cute how the fish swung about when she walked.

"I...like this one," she said.

Perhaps taken aback by Jusetsu's unexpected directness, Koshun was quiet for a moment. "Do you? I'm glad."

Then—ever so slightly—he smiled.

The scent of gardenias filled the air. The flowers' sweet aroma concealed both the overwhelming aura that the rainfall had left behind and the strong smell of grass. The flower petals looked as if they'd absorbed the moonlight—and their beauty was likely more striking in dusk or the darkness of midnight than in the morning sun.

Surrounded by the stifling scent of the gardenias, Jusetsu was guided to Senjo's room yet again.

"The ghost visited me again last night, but the barrier and talisman you sorted out for me made me feel reassured. I wasn't as scared as I was before. You have my gratitude," Senjo said, thanking her.

Sure enough, the woman did look somewhat less pale.

"Also...it helped to know that it was Hashu." A wistful smile appeared on her face. "I can't imagine he'd ever cause me any harm,

even as a ghost.”

“Ghosts can change their appearance, however. I’d advise you to keep that in mind.” Juseitsu urged her to be careful.

“I will,” Senjo replied, nodding obediently.

Jiujiu had come with Juseitsu to assist her, and she was staying in the back corner of the room. She opened the inside door. Very little morning sunlight could reach that spot inside, and it was rather gloomy.

“Yesterday, after you left, I thought really hard like you told me to, but...” Senjo trailed off as she stood in front of the lattice window. She nervously clasped her hands together. “I still don’t really have a clue who would place a curse on me, or who would even be able to. I may have made an enemy without realizing it, but...I don’t remember ever causing a dispute with anybody around me.”

Generally, the person who a grudge was harbored toward was oblivious to the fact they’d made an enemy. Given the main factors that tended to cause resentment, there was a high chance that the perpetrator was someone Senjo saw every day—somebody close to the Crane Consort.

Asking the other ladies-in-waiting could be a good idea, thought Juseitsu.

“The Crane Consort’s ladies-in-waiting... Have they all been her assistants since she was in Ga Province?”

“Some have, but she got a new set when she came to the inner palace. Those ladies are still from the same province, though.”

The curse began before she reached the inner palace, so if one of the ladies-in-waiting was involved, it had to be one who had been with Banka beforehand.

“I’d like to ask one of her original ladies-in-waiting some questions—the more of a blabbermouth they are, the better.”

“Hm... Her longest-serving assistant is Kitsu Rokujo, but she’s rather stern, so she might not be the best choice. There’s one young girl called To Kojo—she became a lady-in-waiting after I did. She’s young though, so she’s prone to saying a little more than she should...”

Juseitsu asked Senjo to bring the young To Kojo to see her. Senjo went to call for the woman, and a short time later, Juseitsu heard high-pitched chatter coming from outside the room.

“Senjo, Rokujo ordered me to get some flowers ready. They’re apparently for decorating the consort’s bedchamber. If she gets mad at me for not having done it yet, you’ll make sure explain to her, won’t you, Senjo? Rokujo’s all irritated. She isn’t happy with how the consort’s dressed, and her incense doesn’t smell strong enough. His Majesty’s visiting tonight, you see.”

Koshun’s coming?

Now that she thought about it, the atmosphere inside the palace *did* seem more hectic than it was the day before. If the emperor was coming to spend time with the consort, preparations were likely to be manic at this time of day.

“Okay, okay. I’ll come up with an excuse for you. Just make sure you listen carefully to what the Raven Consort has to say, all right? And keep your voice down a bit more.”

Senjo looked like she was at her wit’s end as she let Kojo into the room. Kojo was one of the ladies-in-waiting who was standing behind the Crane Consort the last time Jusetsu visited. Her skin was healthy and dewy, and she had big, charming eyes. Her hairstyle and ruqun, however, were rather untidy—perhaps a sign that she wasn’t very detail-orientated. She blinked incessantly at Jusetsu as the latter sat in a chair. It was as if she was staring at a rare beast.

“There are a couple of things I’d like to ask you,” Jusetsu began.

“I know,” said Kojo, nodding. “Senjo told me. A curse, was it? I’m totally clueless when it comes to stuff like that. You think Senjo got on someone’s bad side, right? I haven’t heard anything like that though. I mean, Rokujo keeps a watchful eye over all of us.”

Jusetsu gave the girl a look to ask her what she meant.

Kojo continued. “She tells us that bearing grudges, envying others, and getting angry, all those are bad—and that you reap what you sow. If we keep our hearts pure, we’ll be happy. That’s one of Hakumyoshi’s blessed doctrines, so she says.”

“Hakumyoshi...?”

“The god of the Eight True Teachings. Don’t you hear about him around here? Hakumyoshi’s pretty famous in Ga Province. They’ve built loads of shrines to him and everything.”

“The Eight True Teachings...” Jusetsu felt like she’d heard of it

somewhere before. No, wait...she was thinking of the True Teachings of the Moon.

That was the religion that Ran Hyogetsu started. Their names were very similar—could they have anything to do with each other? Or did all such religions have that kind of name? Jusetsu knew that new religions were making headlines all over the place—the True Teachings of the Moon was just one of many. Faith in Uren Niangniang had waned, and her shrines were allegedly becoming deserted. Even the Seiu Shrine in the Winter Ministry was in a terrible state.

“Most of the ladies-in-waiting here are believers. Senjo too. Isn’t that right, Senjo?”

Kojo turned toward Senjo, and the young woman nodded.

“After Hashu’s death, I spent all my days crying, but Hakumyoshi really helped put my mind at ease.” Senjo stroked the white coral decoration hanging from her belt. When she wanted to calm herself down, she’d pass her hand over it repeatedly.

“Is there a meaning behind that decoration?” Jusetsu asked.

“It’s proof that she’s a believer of the Eight True Teachings. I’ve got one too. See?” Kojo explained, showing Jusetsu a hanging decoration that was attached to her own belt. Then, she added unconcernedly, “I wear it more because it’s cute than because of my faith, though.”

“Do the Eight True Teachings have anything to do with...the True Teachings of the Moon?” Jusetsu asked.

“The moon? What?”

Kojo and Senjo both looked blank at her question.

“If you don’t know of it, that’s fine,” Jusetsu said, dismissing it. “Anyway, who is this ‘Hakumyoshi’?”

“I told you, that’s our *god*. Being a god, nobody’s ever seen him, though. He has a shrine maiden. What was she called again...?”

“Injo,” Senjo answered reprovably. This name meant “hidden girl.”

“Oh yeah, that’s her, that tiny little girl. And then there’s the person who founded the whole thing. They’re in charge of all kinds of things.”

Jusetsu frowned and thought to herself about what Kojo was saying.

“The Crane Consort despises gods and religion, so she isn’t a believer herself. She doesn’t even wear the white coral. Even so, she lets us court ladies do what we like. I mean, it’s not like it particularly gets in the way or anything. The Crane Consort gives us freedom in that respect. Well, it’s more like she just isn’t interested in anybody else.”

“Watch what you say, Kojo,” warned Senjo.

“Huh? Did I say something bad? I don’t think I did. I mean, I’m *glad* she’s not the kind of consort who’s always on our backs, you know? And she’s always chucking her old ruquns and hairpins our way. You got that pine-colored fabric the other day, didn’t you, Senjo? Don’t you think it was kind of plain? There was that purple fabric as well, so I thought you should’ve picked that instead. Were you holding back so Rokujo could have it?”

Kojo’s unreserved chatter was unfaltering. She kept gliding from one topic to the next effortlessly.

“No. I took it because I wanted to make something for my mother-in-law with the fabric.”

“Your mother-in-law... Oh yeah, that’s right—your dead fiancé’s mom, isn’t it? The one you sent a gift to not long ago. I know I shouldn’t say this, but you didn’t even get married, and your fiancé is dead. Do you *really* need to do so much for her?” said Kojo, looking staggered.

Senjo smiled sadly. “My mother-in-law and father-in-law are the only vague ties to my husband I have left.”

“Oh, is that it?” said Kojo. She clearly didn’t understand in the slightest.

“The two of them were very worried about me coming to the inner palace with the Crane Consort. As glamorous as it seems, it can be a frightening place too. There’s a lot of ghost stories concerning the inner palace...”

“I often hear ghost stories too. They’re fun, aren’t they?” Kojo seemed to like them, but Senjo—the girl she was talking to—had personal experience with ghosts.

She frowned. “Fun? Really, Kojo?”

“Oh, don’t tattle on me to Rokujo!” Kojo begged. “Anyway, are we done with this conversation? Do you mind if I leave?”

As soon as she said that, Jusetsu looked up from her silent thoughts.

“Yes, you may. My apologies for getting in the way of your work.”

“Don’t worry. I’m happy you gave me an excuse to slack off. Oh, that’s a secret.” Kojo then smiled mischievously and dashed out of the room. She was in a hurry.

“I do apologize,” Senjo began. “She does lack common courtesy... She’s from the lowest-ranking family in the Saname clan, but she wasn’t really given the strictest of upbringings.”

“It doesn’t bother me. I like that she’s energetic,” replied Jusetsu.

That brought a smile to Senjo’s face. “That much is true. That’s what matters most, after all. I feel like her energy rubs off on me a little too.”

“You need friends like that. You should keep her around.”

“Really...? Do you think so?” Senjo replied. The look on her face said, “*I think I’ll get fed up with her,*” but that was exactly why Jusetsu thought Senjo should spend time with her. Kojo was the kind of girl who could drag those kinds of emotions out of others.

“Don’t bear grudges, don’t envy others, don’t get angry, and keep your heart pure... That was it, wasn’t it?” Those were the so-called doctrines of the Eight True Teachings. “I’m sure those doctrines would attract people who are worn down.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s exhausting to bear a grudge, or to be angry. If you let those things go, your mind will be at peace. But...telling someone not to bear grudges or experience anger is the same as telling them to feel nothing. I personally feel it’s healthier to encourage people to come to terms with their feelings, rather than stop feeling them at all. However...” Jusetsu cast her gaze downward. “I’m sure it’s easier for those who’ve grown tired of resentment to not think about the grudges they harbor. To feel nothing instead.”

Senjo simply stayed silent to let herself think about what Jusetsu was saying.

“The Eight True Teachings... Are any shamans involved in this religion?” Jusetsu asked.

This sudden question made Senjo blink with surprise. “Shamans? Yes, there are... Some are believers themselves while others protect the shrines. The founder himself, Hakurai, is a shaman as well.”

“If he’s a shaman, I’m sure he is capable of placing a curse.”

“What are you implying...?” exclaimed Senjo in shock, looking rattled. She covered her mouth with her hands. “Are you saying that someone from the Eight True Teachings placed the curse on me?”

“Curses can’t be carried out half-heartedly. Is there anyone else you know who seems capable of placing a curse?”

“Well, no...but don’t you think it’s a little rude to suspect one of the shamans from the Eight True Teachings, just because there are no other options?”

“I’m simply saying that they are the most likely suspects. If somebody you knew wanted to place a curse on you, who would they turn to for help? The faith is so widespread that most of the ladies-in-waiting are believers, isn’t it?”

“Still, that doesn’t prove anything. I can’t imagine someone who follows this religion placing a *curse*.” Senjo clasped her belt decoration in her hands. “After Hashu was killed, I couldn’t eat or even sleep anymore. I loathed the men that killed him so much...but they had already been executed, and there wasn’t anything more I could do. I can’t tell you how much I regretted going to visit our regional god’s shrine and riding on that palanquin. After all that, Hashu’s parents took me to a shrine of the Eight True Teachings. The founder of the faith was there, and he told me I could leave all the hatred and regret I held behind at that spot—and that Hakumyoshi would shoulder my troubles for me. Then, he gave me this belt decoration. I remember how refreshed I felt the moment I touched it. It was like a breeze was blowing right through me. It definitely comforted me at that time.”

“Wait... Did you say that Hakumyoshi would shoulder your troubles for you?” Jusetsu whispered. She glanced at the door. “Where would they take them?”

“What...?” said Senjo, confused—but Jusetsu carried on talking regardless.

“There are several ways to place a curse, but the one used most often is to give the person you wish to curse a hex item. People can hide snakes, toads, and insects inside gifts. Combs, rings, and necklaces are a few other options—there are all kinds of hex items. Did you receive a gift of any sort before leaving Ga Province?”

“A gift...? Well, mine and Hashu’s relatives did give me lots of different presents.”

“Are they still in your possession?”

“I wasn’t able to bring them all, but I still have a few,” Senjo said.

“Show me,” said Jusetsu.

Senjo opened her chest and pulled out a box. It was a beautiful box made of cypress with brocade glued onto its surface.

“My uncle on my mother’s side gave me this, and I keep my presents inside of it. They’re very precious to me. I have some fine silk from my paternal grandparents and a belt from my maternal grandparents. You can get wonderful raw silk in Ga Province, so many of my presents were textiles. This one is my father’s...”

“What’s that?” said Jusetsu, pointing at a cloth parcel at the bottom of the box. It was a thin, small package, wrapped in light blue cloth with a white floral pattern printed on it.

“That’s the Eight True Teachings amulet that Hashu’s parents gave me. It’s supposed to ward off illness, so they told me to lay it underneath my bed. I didn’t want to toss it on the ground and let it get damaged though, so I keep it in this box instead.”

Jusetsu opened up the parcel. As Senjo said, it did have an amulet inside. It was made of hemp paper with lettering and a pattern drawn on it in ink. Jusetsu stared at it in silence for a short while.

“What is it...?” went Senjo.

“This...is no amulet for warding off ill health,” declared Jusetsu.

“Huh...?!” said Senjo. Her bewilderment practically tumbled from her lips.

“This here is a curse incantation. These words are an invocation used to place a curse.” Jusetsu looked at Senjo. “This is the hex item—a talisman that shamans use. I suspect a shaman wrote this. If this is an amulet from the Eight True Teachings, it must have been written by one

of their shamans... And then Hashu's parents gave it to you. They pretended it was an amulet to keep you healthy and told you to lay it carefully beneath your bed. I've heard that hex items are most effective when you put them underneath a bed, or if you hide them in the beams in the ceiling."

Senjo's expression—a slight smile—was frozen onto her face. After a few moments, her cheeks strained and began to move again. "Umm... Are you saying that Hashu's parents...placed a curse on me?"

Jusetsu didn't respond. The amulet had already revealed the truth to her. Senjo knew better than anyone what they'd said when they gave her that gift.

"I can't believe it... No, they can't have *known* what they were giving me was a cursed talisman. They would never do such a thing..."

Senjo trembled slightly. Jusetsu looked down at the amulet again. If Hashu's parents had been oblivious to what they were giving her, why would the person who placed the curse have targeted Senjo? Most importantly of all, this curse had used none other but the ghost of *Hashu* as an apparatus.

When Jusetsu heard that Senjo was still close with Hashu's parents, she did briefly think that it sounded risky. Their son had been killed, and Senjo was still alive. How did Hashu's parents feel about her? How was Senjo interpreting their actions? These questions made Jusetsu feel uneasy.

She had no intention of confessing those thoughts to Senjo as they were just hypotheticals. It didn't seem appropriate to vocalize them. There was only so much that Jusetsu could do.

"I'll reverse the curse for you," she said.

"What?" Senjo looked up.

"I'll reverse the curse back on those who placed it—the shaman and the person who asked the shaman to place the curse. Since the objective of the curse isn't to kill you, it shouldn't kill them in return. I just hope the shaman isn't a dimwit," said Jusetsu before glancing at the amulet.

It was clear to her that he was far from being a dimwit—instead, this shaman was likely at the top of his profession. Why would a top-class shaman place a curse of this level? It was nothing more than

simple harassment.

What were his intentions? Jusetsu frowned at the thought.

“If the curse is reversed, the apparatus will be freed. Hashu’s ghost will immediately disappear. And then he should finally be able to make it over to paradise.”

Jusetsu pulled a peony out of her hair. Its petals melted into pale red smoke on top of her hand and coiled around her fingers. She threw the talisman into the air. As it flipped and flapped around, fluttering to the ground, Jusetsu aimed at it and blew on the pale red smoke.

The talisman silently went up in a blaze. It gave off a light red flame, which bounced around and undulated in the air—looking like it was writhing about.

Jusetsu abruptly waved her hand and sent a gust of wind toward the door. “Go back to your master,” she said.

No sooner did those words leave her lips than the flame turned into an arrow and soared out the door. It sounded like glass had smashed somewhere. The arrow flew away far into the distance, gliding high in the sky at a rapid speed—and before they knew it, it was out of sight. All it left behind was a faint, pale red trail in the slightly cloudy sky.

Jusetsu backed away slightly. The ghost started to appear on the other side of the doorway now that it had been released from the bindings of being an apparatus. Its form wavered slightly, like a heat haze, and gradually became clearer.

Hashu was then standing there, his blood still dripping from the wound where a blade had slashed through his skin.

Senjo ran over to him without saying a word. She stopped in front of the doorway, looking as if she was about to cry as he stood there in front of her.

“Hashu...”

The ghost tried to take a step toward her, but Jusetsu grabbed her arm to pull her back.

“Raven Consort? What are you...?”

Then, a gurgling sound rang out. Senjo looked back at Hashu. His mouth was open now, and she realized the sound she heard was that of

blood pouring from his mouth. His wide-eyed look was directed straight at her—but it wasn't one of love nor affection.

His eyes were gloomy pools of sorrow and anger.

"Sen...jo..." Hashu attempted to say over the sloshing sounds of blood. "Why...did...you...run away... And...abandon...me?"

Gurgle, gurgle. Glug, glug.

With every word he said, frothy blood mixed with drool gushed out of his mouth. Hashu reached his dripping, bloodstained hand out to Senjo.

"You traitor."

That deep rumble was the only thing he said that sounded clear. The apparition then wavered and flickered like a heat haze again, and then disappeared—silently, as if it was burning away, starting with its fingertips.

All that remained was a dim shadow.

Senjo sunk to the ground. Her eyes were wide open, but she couldn't even blink. Tears overflowed from her eyes, dripping down onto her robe and lower. There was a wet mark on the floor.

"Was that...what Hashu was thinking as he died?" A hoarse voice escaped the woman's lips. "Did he really think that I'm...a traitor? That I abandoned my principles to run away...?"

Senjo hung her head and looked down at the floor.

"He was right... I did," she went on. "I abandoned him and escaped. The truth is while Hashu was stopping the palanquin carriers from getting away, I left him so that I could go and get help. Still...I knew he wasn't going to get away unharmed. And if I stayed there and backed him up, I might have been killed too. I was...scared. I was scared that they'd kill me. That's why I took advantage of Hashu telling me to run so that I could escape. When he says that I abandoned him and ran away...he's telling the truth."

A constant stream of tears continued to pour down her face, but Senjo couldn't be bothered to wipe them away. Her gaze wandered aimlessly around the room.

"Should I be dead too? Is that what my mother-in-law wishes? Did Hashu want me to die with him? Is it wrong that I'm still alive?"

Senjo prostrated herself on the ground and sobbed.

Jusetsu looked down at the young woman's shaking body. *This was me once*, she thought. She knew exactly what that fear that Senjo experienced felt like. Scared and frightened of what could happen to her at that time, she had clutched tightly onto her knees and trembled. And as she had done so, she'd left her mother to die.

What could her mother possibly have felt when she left Jusetsu behind and ran away? Jusetsu didn't know. The only knowledge she was equipped with at that moment was the little bit she knew about ghosts.

"I told you that ghosts can change appearance...did I not?" Jusetsu started quietly. "People don't have just one emotion. You say *you* were scared, but Hashu must have been scared too. He might have told you to run away, but would it surprise you if part of him had wanted you to stay...?"

Senjo looked up. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

"The ghost you just saw only showed you one emotion. Since it was being used for a curse, Hashu's resentment and sadness were being exposed and exploited. There are also the feelings of the people who placed the curse—Hashu's parents. Those kinds of things can get mixed up," Jusetsu explained. "However...Hashu still chose to let you get away. You mustn't forget that. Although our thoughts are changeable and difficult to understand, the actions we take don't change, no matter how much time passes. The fact is that Hashu kept you alive. Don't deny what he did."

Yes. That's right.

As Jusetsu explained this to Senjo word by word, she felt a change inside her own heart.

All of this time, I've been disavowing the choice that my mother made, she realized.

The truth was for all those years, she actually resented her mother for that desperate decision that she made. If only Jusetsu had died with her, she wouldn't have had to live with the pain of knowing that she had gotten away and left her mother to suffer.

And yet...

Senjo's mouth opened slightly, and she stared up at Jusetsu with

tears in her eyes.

At last, she bowed her head deeply. "I won't," she replied in a raspy voice.

"Jiujiu," Jusetsu called out to her lady-in-waiting in the corner of the room.

The attendant had been watching things unfold with bated breath. She stood up straight and said hurriedly, "Yes?"

"Call on To Kojo for me. And fetch some hot water as well."

Jiujiu swiftly left the room.

Jusetsu turned to look down at Senjo. "You should have that girl follow you for a while. She's the very embodiment of vitality," she explained. "The curse wasn't wishing for your death. Hashu's parents didn't put that much thought into it. They just...didn't have anywhere to channel their feelings."

Jusetsu thought about the shaman who'd channeled Hashu's parent's irrepressible emotions into a curse to drive them away. Senjo had mentioned how the founder of the Eight True Teachings had told her that she could leave all her hatred and regret there. Hashu's parents must have consigned the torment they were experiencing to the talisman and left it behind them. That was a way for them to be freed from their suffering. The shaman had taken the pain they'd entrusted him with and turned it into something sinister.

I don't like that, thought Jusetsu. Targetless emotions weren't something to be turned into a curse. *How is that supposed to save anybody?*

"If you have emotions you can't do anything about, it's not a curse you need," said Jusetsu. "It's... It's probably prayer."

"Probably" was all she could say. After all, prayers could be used to place curses too. Jusetsu, however, just wanted to try rather than feeling resentful.

Jiujiu came back holding some hot water and Kojo in tow. The court lady looked totally clueless as to why she'd been summoned.

"Stick with Senjo," Jusetsu ordered Kojo simply. Then, she got up and left through the door at the back of the room.

Standing outside in the gloom, she was engulfed by the stifling

humidity. There was a chance it was going to rain that night—but the ghost that once lingered in that spot was no more.

There was no wind, but the rows of copperplate banners lining the room rustled against each other, nonetheless. A man wearing a stone mask and a long white robe stood in the center. His hair wasn't tied in a topknot, and he wasn't wearing a futou either. Instead, his black hair—which was interspersed with strands of white—was tied in a loose loop in the back.

The curse had been reversed.

The blunt sound of a hard object breaking rang out through the air. A banner had snapped right in two. One after another, they cracked, filling the room with an offensive noise. The man sighed and clamped his lips together. At that very moment, his mask shattered and fell to the floor. A line of blood flowed down from his forehead. He took his handkerchief out of his breast pocket and wiped it away as if it were nothing.

He glared at nothing in particular. "...So *that's* how it's going to be, is it?" he whispered.

The man's voice was deep and growl-like. His face was almost as white as his robe, and his piercing eyes were slanted upward. He was a few years over forty, but he didn't look it—he had a certain youthfulness to him that made it hard to tell how old he really was. The tall man, who stood with excellent posture, had a tinge of nervousness on his oval face.

"It seems as if Uren Niangniang really is weakening," he spat, sounding somewhat disgusted—and with that, he left the room.

He traveled down from the outer passage into a garden and made his way over to the pavilion.

She has to be here, he thought—and true enough, there was a girl lying asleep in that spot, curled up like a cat. She could have been ten, or perhaps younger, and her face was still innocent-looking. Her white ruqun was muddy in places, suggesting that she may have been running about playing in the garden earlier. The dirt made the man frown.

"Injo," the man called out with irritation in his voice. The young girl didn't wake up.

The man sighed and almost left the pavilion, but suddenly turned back around. He took off the long jacket over his robe and gently placed it over the sleeping girl.

He heard footsteps trotting over to him from the outer passage. The man quietly left the pavilion and headed in the direction of the sound.

“...Hakurai.”

“What is it?”

“There you are. Oh, are you hurt?” Upon seeing Hakurai’s forehead, the young man—a domestic servant—panicked, exaggerating the severity of his small injury.

“It’s just a graze. It’s nothing,” he said. “Never mind that. What did you want from me?”

“O-of course. Sir has requested your presence.”

Hakurai glanced back at the pavilion, then gave the young man a nod.

“Understood. I’ll be there right away.”

He left down the outer passage, taking long strides as he went. The domestic servant followed him from behind. As he walked, the white coral decoration hanging from the servant’s belt swayed from side to side—and Hakurai’s did the same.

*The
Turtle
Sovereign*

TANKAI, the eunuch sent to Jusetsu to be her new bodyguard, was somewhat different to how she'd imagined him to be.

"Eisei said that you'd get on well with him, so I assumed he'd be a...quiet sort of person," Jusetsu remarked.

Onkei had an extremely serious look on his face. "He must have suggested him out of spite."

"Spite? Toward me?"

"No, to me."

Jusetsu stared hard at him. You and Tankai...don't get along?"

"I just don't like him," Onkei replied, refreshingly decisive in his opinion. "That said, when it comes to our bodyguarding duties, it is true that we can compensate for each other's weaknesses."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Tankai is a skilled archer. I, on the other hand, specialize in close combat."

"I see," said Jusetsu. "You're better at short distances, while he's better at long distances. Oh, it wasn't him that shot an arrow when I was attacked by Shogetsu, was it?"

Onkei nodded. "He shot the arrow through his shoulder, yes."

It made sense that Eisei would recommend someone as proficient as Tankai sounded. However, things certainly weren't quite that simple.

"Raven Consort. Kogyo has peeled some pears for you."

Tankai entered the room holding a bowl of fruit in one hand...and in the other, he had a peeled pear that he already bit into. The captivating-looking young man was very slightly taller than Onkei, and his face—with its almond-shaped eyes—had a sort of refinement to it. His personality, on the other hand, was as carefree as the wind—and he was as uninhibited as a feral child.

"Tankai," Onkei said, his voice sharp and cold. "Remember your manners."

"Oh? That was a briefer warning than usual," Tankai remarked.

"Niangniang is here. I'll go into more detail later."

“I can’t remember every single thing, can I?”

Tankai seemed to be aware that his etiquette was poor—to the extent he was unable to remember what he’d learned.

Jusetsu didn’t care about manners herself, but she was still impressed that he managed to last so long in the inner palace without any.

“Just let me tell you this: don’t carry a bowl with one hand,” Onkei said.

“Is that all?”

“If you were holding it with both hands, you wouldn’t have been able to carry a pear in your other one in the first place, let alone eat it.”

“Hah. That makes sense,” Tankai said, although his tone of voice implied that he was entirely uninterested. He placed the bowl down on the table. “Should I call Ishiha in as well? He’s been playing with Shinshin outside.”

Jusetsu nodded, and Tankai grinned and left the room. She could sort of understand how he managed to survive the inner palace with his lack of manners. He had a charm that you couldn’t bring yourself to hate, and a certain appeal that attracted people’s attention.

“I’m sorry about him, niangniang.” It seemed that Onkei’s short exchange with Tankai had worn him out already.

“It doesn’t bother me,” Jusetsu replied. It actually didn’t.

Tankai brought Ishiha back with him. The boy was carrying Shinshin under his arm as well. Jiujiu and Jusetsu’s other assistants joined them, and everyone dug into the pears together. The addition of Tankai to the Yamei Palace had made the place even more lively. The solemn and frightening atmosphere that the Raven Consort’s palace once possessed had been completely obliterated—at least during the daytime.

Or rather...lately, it wasn’t even quiet in the evenings.

“You had a visitor last night, didn’t you, Raven Consort?” Tankai asked. He leaned against the door and bit into his pear.

“I did...” Jusetsu nodded, putting a slice of pear into her mouth. The chilled pears were juicy and eating them in this humid weather made her feel like she was being brought back to life.

"One bodyguard isn't enough if you have such frequent nighttime visitors. Adding me to the team was the right thing to do," he remarked.

"Well, my increase in evening visitors wasn't the issue I had in mind when I made that decision..."

The Yamei Palace was receiving more visitors as of late, but with very different questions...

"My back's been killing me lately. Could it be a curse?"

"My younger sister received a proposal. Could you be so kind as to judge whether he'd be a good match?"

"Do you have any love spells?"

Lately, person after person arrived with questions like those. She understood they were all at their wit's end with their respective troubles, but she still couldn't work out why there were so many of them.

"You had a request from a lady-in-waiting at the Hakkaku Palace not long ago, didn't you?" said Jiujiu, chewing noisily on a pear. "And you consoled a court lady over there as well. You went to the Hien Palace before, and you've been going to visit Hua niangniang too. Slowly but surely, you're losing your reputation as an enigmatic, frightening consort. Everybody has started to realize what a kind person you are, niangniang."

Jiujiu smiled cheerily at that.

Jusetsu, however, felt that she was growing weak. How had she possibly let things get to this point? Each and every decision she made had built up and changed the world around her without her meaning to.

As a result, she couldn't forgive herself.

She couldn't forgive herself for taking in a lady-in-waiting, for helping a eunuch, or for accepting any gifts. She knew these things were wrong, but she chose to do them anyway.

A strange sense of fretfulness consumed her. This wasn't the way things should be. She was sure of it.

But...if she wanted to fix things, where could she even start? Letting everything go and returning to a solitary life was no longer a possibility.

"Don't you think you should take in a few more court ladies if this

is the way things are going?” Jiujiu suggested. She then lowered her voice to a whisper. “I wouldn’t like it if there were lots of other ladies-in-waiting about, though.”

Jusetsu looked over at her, and she shrugged her shoulders, embarrassed.

“I mean, I’d get jealous,” she went on.

“Jealous...?”

“You’re kind, so I’m sure you’d treat your other ladies-in-waiting well too.”

Jusetsu cocked her head to one side slightly and thought to herself for a moment. “You’re the only lady-in-waiting I need,” she said.

“Do you mean that?” Jiujiu exclaimed, looking pleased.

Is it really something to be so happy about? Jusetsu thought. She found it strange.

“Don’t you know what it’s like to be jealous, Raven Consort?” Tankai asked.

Jusetsu turned toward him, and he narrowed his eyes at her in amusement. Tankai always had a carefree smile pasted on his face.

“If you’re asking me whether I’ve experienced it myself, then probably not,” she admitted.

With a faint smile still on his lips, Tankai nodded. Onkei was wiping Ishiha’s hands for him, but he was still keeping an eye on Tankai, glancing his way from time to time. It looked like he was worried that he’d say something rude again.

“I’m sure you’ll learn before long.”

His words sounded like a prophecy. Jusetsu stared at Tankai. One fortune-telling skill was to predict one’s own destiny based on casual comments that others made—such as hearing the word “death” meant that your own was close. In Tankai’s eyes, there may not have been any deep meaning to what he had just said, but his words quietly crept into Jusetsu’s heart and sunk to its depths, regardless.

“That reminds me...have you heard this rumor?” Tankai exclaimed with an odd cheeriness to his voice in an attempt to brighten up the atmosphere at the table. “I heard something interesting when I was in the Bridle House. There’s a rumor about a ghost appearing in the

inner court.”

That certainly wasn’t something to be discussing in such a cheerful tone. Jiujiu scowled and looked uncomfortable.

Undeterred, Tankai carried on chattering away. “Apparently, the ghost of an elderly manservant roams around in the middle of the night.”

“An elderly manservant...?” Ishiha whispered curiously.

Tankai flashed the boy a smile. “It means an old helper,” he told him. “It doesn’t seem like he was a eunuch, though. His headscarf and clothing both suggest that he comes from ancient times. With his back hunched over like this and his robe all tattered, he stumbles about the inner court. He holds up some kind of small container as he limps along. Such a sad story, isn’t it?”

“You say this ghost has taken up residence in the inner court?” Jusetsu asked.

“That’s what people have started whispering about recently. I heard it for the first time just the other day.”

“Why would a ghost from the ancient times start roaming about *now*?”

“That’s a fair point... Well, it is just a rumor, after all. Who knows if there’s any truth to it, you know?”

“Do you know anyone who’s actually seen this ghost?”

“No,” Tankai responded unceremoniously. “It’s in the inner court, so I wouldn’t know. I only work in the inner palace.”

The emperor lived in the inner court, and his consorts lived in the inner palace. The inner court had its own set of eunuchs, much like the inner palace.

Jusetsu sighed. “There’s no shortage of stories here that may or may not be true. I’ve grown tired of hearing them.”

“You’ve got it wrong, Raven Consort. It’s the petty rumors that are most important. Rumors contain a mass of information—they can reveal secrets you’d never expect. If you want to play your cards right, it’s best to be the first one to know about these things.”

“...I see. So that’s how you’ve managed to stay safe all these years, is it?”

A friendly smile appeared on Tankai's face. "I'm going to be useful to have around. If there's any information that you'd like to get your hands on, I'll find it out for you."

"I don't need any particular information about the things going on around me. Your help will not be required," Jusetzu said, before adding, "Don't get yourself into any danger."

"Huh?" Tankai responded, blinking at her disappointedly. "Raven Consort, you're kind of..." He scratched his ear and looked slightly confused. It seemed he wasn't used to being spoken to in this way.

"...Kind," Jiujiu interrupted.

"Not 'kind,' exactly. More like 'soft.'"

"Hey!" said Jiujiu, giving him an angry glare.

"Danger is practically in my job description, so it's the first time someone's told me to avoid it."

Tankai narrowed his eyes and stared at Jusetzu, as if he was trying to get a measure of her—but then he suddenly broke into a smile. He glanced at Onkei, then shifted his gaze back toward Jusetzu.

"Well, understood, niangniang. I won't thrust myself into any dangerous circumstances. But if you find yourself at risk, then I will do all I can to protect you—in return for the concern you've shown for my own safety, as inconsequential as I am."

Having spent so little time with him, it was hard for Jusetzu to gauge how serious he was being. Even so, she took it at face value.

"All right," she said with a nod.

The friendly look returned to Tankai's face.

"That said, niangniang—you may say that you don't need any information about what's going on around you, but such nonchalance may be misguided. Perhaps you've done fine without so far, but that could change."

"What makes you say that?"

"You're not like the Raven Consorts that came before you. You're not the kind of consort who's trapped deep inside the inner palace, enshrouded in mystery. You're friendly with my master. It's bad. Really bad."

The former Winter Minister, Gyoei, had berated her about that

too. He was adamant that she shouldn't get close to him.

"Why?" she asked curtly.

"Chief Secretariat Un is deeply unsettled by it. He's the grand chancellor, you know. His granddaughter is Kajo, the Mandarin Duck concert. The chief secretariat has 'ears' inside the inner palace, acquiring information by bribing court ladies and eunuchs. He's bewildered by the fact that the Raven Consort—who the emperor *never* took any notice of before—has suddenly started interacting with him. Anyway, he doesn't have much information on the Raven Consort herself, but he's frantically trying to find out what kind of person she is and how close she is to my master."

"...If he does look into it, he'll find out. It's not as if the emperor and I have a relationship that necessitates 'frantic' research."

"I don't know about that," Tankai responded to Jusetsu. "Since the Raven Consort doesn't spend the night with the emperor, it's true that there's no risk of her giving birth to an heir—but, depending on the circumstances, that might prove to be even more burdensome."

Why? Jusetsu frowned.

"Creating an heir is the emperor's duty, so my master cherishes his consorts very much. However, your relationship doesn't fit into that category. And he pays you frequent visits nonetheless..."

"...He's not the kind of man who'd be kind to people out of 'duty,'" Jusetsu said.

Koshun wasn't clever enough for that.

Another cryptic smile appeared on Tankai's face. "I suppose that's the point," he said.

"What...?"

"I've taken a liking to you, so I'll collect as much useful information as I can without putting myself in danger. Otherwise, you'll find yourself in trouble from time to time."

With those words, Tankai opened the door and left. *Maybe he's going to have a look around outside*, Jusetsu thought.

Onkei let out a sigh. Before he got the chance to vocalize it himself, Jusetsu said, "He's a strange one, isn't he?"

"More selfish than strange."

Onkei seemed fed up, but his face actually looked exceptionally beautiful when tinged by melancholy like he was now. Jusetsu stared at him for so long that he asked her what was wrong. She shook her head—if she said what was on her mind, it would only trouble him further.

Jiujiu, on the other hand, came right out with it.

“Beautiful people look beautiful, even when they seem sad,” she said.

Ishiha nodded in earnest too. An embarrassed look came over Onkei’s face, and he let out yet another deep sigh.

The dewdrops on the lotus leaves were glistening following the previous night’s rain. Even the buds looked moist and plump with water. The light reflecting off the dew was so bright that it made Koshun squint. He placed his hand on the railing. The outer passage that faced out onto the lotus pond was shaded, but the muggy heat was still inescapable. Eisei had been fanning him with a fan to keep cool, but once Ka Meiin appeared from around the corner of the outer passage, Koshun dismissed him.

Meiin bowed, and Koshun ushered him to come over.

“The imperial council meeting overran today, didn’t it? Not that I wasn’t expecting it to.”

The main topic of the meeting had been deciding who would fill the empty official posts. The Magpie Consort’s father, previously the vice-minister for the secretariat, had been demoted to a regional position. In addition to that, the functionary of the board of personnel had also been dismissed for arranging for Shogetsu to be admitted to the inner palace at Gyoei’s request. Those events had left two positions vacant. The court council had gotten into a dispute over who should be appointed to those two roles.

“Chief Secretariat Un wasn’t going to back down, was he?”

“That wasn’t really a surprise, either...”

On one hand, Un Eitoku, the chief secretariat, was recommending men from prominent families. On the other hand, Meiin was recommending those from families without such a reputation. Those families were commonly known as the Midwinter Faction or Midwinter families, a term referencing their humble status and lack of connections

to those with power. Opinion in the imperial court meeting was split in two.

“Long ago, the imperial secretariat was like the flower of the most prominent families, whereas the board of personnel was their roots. There was a lot of nepotism. He’s desperate to make things the way they used to be again.”

At one point, being the child of a reputable family was enough to secure you a role as a ranked official. That system still existed, but most of the so-called “leading players” in the world of imperial officials were those who achieved outstanding results in the imperial examination. That said, since they had plenty of time and money to spare, it wasn’t that difficult for descendants of distinguished families to pass the imperial examination—provided they weren’t total blockheads. As a result, there were still many people from reputable families in high-ranking official posts. However, there were other families who also had plenty of time and money to spare, including well-to-do merchants, landowners, and even powerful clans. Many of those who had come to the forefront in the world of imperial officials were now part of this category.

“He’s especially interested in regaining the status of the board of personnel. After all, they have authority over who’s assigned to official positions. If he manages it, we’ll be back in a world where wealthy families have all the glory again.”

Meiin made a hand movement that looked like he was putting down a Go stone.

“...At least, that’s what I think,” he added before shaking his head. “People’s daily lives don’t go backward. That means that politics must move forward too.”

Koshun stared at the lotuses, not saying a word. In the end, he had decided in favor of the people Meiin had recommended. However, he couldn’t get the look of betrayal that Un Eitoku had given him out of his mind.

Meiin wasn’t from a prominent family. He was the son of a wealthy merchant in the imperial capital. When he passed the imperial examination, the prominent families still reigned supreme. It was hard for a merchant’s son to get a job as an imperial official, no matter how impressive his test results were. Becoming a subordinate at the Winter Ministry was about as high as someone like him could dream. The other

option he would have was to take on a role that was not laid out in the administrative code. Meiin was assigned to one such role in out in the countryside for many years, and it was Un Eitoku who recognized his intelligence and chose him to become his own son-in-law. Eitoku then recommended Meiin to a post as a scholar at the Koto Institute. Eitoku's foresight was correct—Meiin had ended up as their leading scholar. If Eitoku was Koshun's right-hand man, Meiin was on his left.

"Chief Secretariat Un is the present head of the famous Un family..." Meiin whispered in a somewhat raspy voice.

"He singled you out, though—he couldn't have been that particular about whether you were from a prominent family or not himself," Koshun remarked.

A faint smile appeared on Meiin's face. The man had an intellectual air to his appearance. "There's a difference between taking someone as your son-in-law and letting them hold authority."

Sometimes, Meiin let a hint of cynicism peek through. Due to his background, he seemed to have an inferiority complex toward families who were considered influential.

"...He didn't want someone as talented as you to slip away."

Koshun's comment was an attempt to steer the conversation in a different direction, but he wasn't especially good at it. Meiin appeared to sense what he was doing and played along.

"Nowadays, nobody gets turned away at the gate just because their family isn't reputable enough, so I do believe that things are improving. Even so, when it comes to those with no financial power or backing, that gate is still closed," Meiin said. "Oh yes, on that topic—there was something I wanted to ask of you, Your Majesty."

"What is it?"

"There's someone I knew when I worked out in the countryside... He was the vice-envoy for observation in Ga Province."

This role was one of those which was not stipulated in law.

"As you know, those roles are not assigned by the appointment of the central government, but rather under the discretion of their superiors. The man in question is an extremely competent person, so much so that he's in high demand in many different regions. As you can imagine, he passed the imperial examination with top results. And

yet...”

“Was he one of those who got turned away?”

“Exactly. He was originally an orphan, but he was adopted at the age of fourteen or fifteen. He thought it was better to work freely in the countryside than force his way into some imperial official role in the central government where he would feel uneasy. He’s been a regional official for all this time.”

“Has he changed his mind?”

“No—I’m the one who recommended him. He said he was planning on giving up his post as the vice-envoy for observation in Ga Province as something unpleasant apparently happened over there. That’s why I invited him to come and work for me, if possible. Of course, the Koto Institute is under your direct control, so that will only proceed if I have your permission, Your Majesty.”

“...Ga Province?”

“Yes. That’s where the Crane Consort is from, isn’t it? It doesn’t matter whether you’re an imperial official or have a role that isn’t set out in the administrative code—if you can’t get on good terms with the Saname clan, you’ll have a difficult time over there.”

“Didn’t your friend get along with them?” Koshun asked.

“It would seem not.”

“Did he go into detail as to why?”

“No...” Meiin looked quizzical. “It is not unusual for people to move away because of conflicts with influential local figures. Should I ask him about it? He’s staying with me at the moment.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Koshun thought to himself for a moment. “If that’s the case, bring him to the Koto Institute.”

Meiin’s eyes widened slightly. “Are you suggesting you’d like to meet him in person?”

“I’m going to have to meet him regardless, aren’t I? As much as I trust your recommendation, I’d like to find out what he’s like.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Meiin said with a nod. “I shall bring him along whenever it suits you.”

“All right,” Koshun responded. “What’s his name?”

“Reiko Shiki. He’s originally from Reki Province—to the northeast of the imperial capital.”

Reki Province? Koshun whispered to himself inside his head. That was where Kajo’s lover had met his fate—he had gotten tangled up in the uprising staged by the True Teachings of the Moon.

What a strange coincidence. As Koshun pondered on this, he went to finish up his conversation with Meiin—but Eisei appeared.

“Un Eitoku is...” he began, but before he had the chance to finish his sentence, the man himself came striding around the corner of the outer passage. Un Eitoku’s footsteps were surprisingly sprightly for a man of his advanced age.

“What is it? Do you have some urgent business for me?” Koshun said.

After kneeling to the emperor, Eitoku replied, “That makes me wonder if you’d grace me with your presence if there was nothing urgent to discuss.”

Koshun forced a smile. “No need to be so cynical. You should take a look at the lotuses from here,” he said, pointing to the space beside him.

Meiin gave up his spot, and Eitoku glowered at him. It looked like Meiin was still on his bad side following what had happened in the imperial council meeting.

“You two have made a habit of excluding me as of late—being the decrepit old man that I am.”

“You wouldn’t call yourself those names if you really saw yourself that way. It doesn’t mean we’re excluding you just because we didn’t accommodate your opinion. Don’t be so grouchy.”

“...Don’t be so casual in your attempt to pacify me, Your Majesty.”

Koshun had said what he did to try to ease Eitoku’s frustration, but it seemed to have had the opposite effect. Eitoku was the only one of Koshun’s vassals who was able to be so frank with him. As his master, he had been Koshun’s unwavering support for so long—when he was the crown prince, when he had his title stripped from him, when he’d been reinstated, as well as since he’d ascended the throne.

“I don’t wish to exclude you. That’s the truth. I’m sure you know that, don’t you, Grand Master Un?”

That was the title Koshun called Eitoku when he was a child. For a moment, there was a look of intense nostalgia in the emperor's eyes—and then an even sadder look came to his face.

He's getting old.

That was the thought that came into Koshun's mind after seeing this face. He felt a cold pain inside, as if a blade had silently permeated his heart, that was accompanied by a sense of sadness.

Eitoku apologized for his rudeness and promptly left. After the hunchbacked man disappeared along the outer passage, Meiin began to mutter something.

"Chief Secretariat Un was probably planning on offering his views regarding non-stipulated official roles."

"Do you think so?"

"They already have most of the power in the provinces, so those who are dispatched from the central government end up being overshadowed. Official posts are added out of convenience in order to give people rewards, so those posts don't have any significance anymore. Recently, he's been voicing his bitterness, saying that if the importance of the original government officials is purely nominal and non-stipulated officials are allowed to dominate, then there is no point in having an administrative code in the first place."

Being a non-stipulated official was useful. Chiefs were able to make decisions without the emperor's discretion, and they could employ underlings without seeking the judgement of the central government. As their name suggested, they weren't bound by the laws. These roles filled gaps that imperial officials just couldn't, and that was why they were constantly bickering with them.

I don't think that's the only thing Eitoku is apprehensive about. It's probably Meiin too, Koshun thought as he glanced at Meiin from the side. Eitoku was likely scared that he would upstage him. Being a scholar was a non-official position, after all.

Five years ago—or even three—Eitoku wouldn't have had that fear. His old age was weakening his spirit or clouding his judgement, or both. Either that or he'd lost his ability to look ahead into the future, forcing him to turn his focus to the past instead.

Koshun, on the other hand, was deliberating how to deal with

Eitoku and his faction of prominent families.

Eitoku swayed in his horse-drawn carriage as he traveled from the imperial estate to the Un family residence. The Un family, who were part of the so-called “Five Last Names, Seven Clans” group of distinguished families, lived in a home not far from the imperial estate. Once Eitoku had reached the large entrance to their residence, he got down from the carriage and went through the gate. His servants immediately came over to welcome him.

His second son, Gyotoku, peeked his head out from behind a door. “You’re late, Father.”

“I know,” Eitoku replied.

“We have some steamed rice cakes. I’ll get some tea ready.”

“...Food is all you care about, isn’t it?” Eitoku said with disgust. He stared at Gyotoku’s plump, round face.

“Food is the foundation of all things, Father. It’s important. You can’t think about anything on an empty stomach, nor can you show kindness to others. If you want to have a big heart, you need to keep a full stomach.”

“All right, all right. I understand. That’s enough of that.” Eitoku waved his hand dismissively.

Is it really all right that such a carefree man is the heir to the Un family? He thought to himself. Gyotoku’s personality was as soft as his body. That made him popular among officials, but he lacked the hardheadedness that was occasionally required of him. The idea of retiring and handing Gyotoku the reins of the family made Eitoku feel very uneasy.

If only Chitoku were here.

That thought had crossed his mind countless times. Chitoku, Eitoku’s eldest son, had gotten sick and tired of the harsh ups and downs that came with the world of imperial officials. He hadn’t wasted any time in leaving home to become a trader. Nowadays, he was making a fortune as a leading sea merchant.

Chitoku—in contrast to Gyotoku—was a little too wise, which was probably why he was so quick to abandon his family. Eitoku could only imagine how good things would have been if the two of them had been

able to compensate for each other's weaknesses and given him a helping hand.

There was no point mentioning it at this point, though.

He sighed. Chitoku and Gyotoku were his only sons, and he had chosen a husband for his daughter, believing that he was the right one. That man was Meiin, and the man certainly hadn't disappointed in him when it came to his outstanding intelligence...but there was a chance he had misjudged just how ambitious and difficult he'd be to deal with.

And then there was the emperor.

Ever since he was a young boy, Eitoku never left Koshun's side. He tried to teach him about politics, explain morals, and raise him with love. When Koshun eventually ascended the throne, he was choked up with tears. *Finally*, he thought.

But Koshun wasn't a little boy anymore.

He wasn't a child that Eitoku had to guide and explain things to. Sometimes, their opinions differed. That was natural, and something to take delight in—it showed that he had grown up.

And yet...deep down, Eitoku felt a sense of betrayal that he just couldn't get rid of. Being as clever as he was, Koshun was aware of this too. That was why he'd try to appease him with his words.

As Eitoku was getting changed in his bedroom, he stared at his hand. The years were taking their toll. His hand was scrawny and wrinkly, with lots of loose skin. The oiliness and moisture his hands once had were long gone.

As he was putting his arm through the sleeve of the robe his servant was holding, a voice called out.

"Sir, you have a visitor."

"Who is it?"

"A silk merchant by the name of Ho Sanro," the second servant said.

"Ho? Never heard of him. He can't be a silk merchant from the imperial capital."

"Apparently, he has kindly traveled here from Ga Province."

"Ga Province, you say?" Eitoku stroked his mustache silently for a short while. "All right. I shall meet with him."

That night, Koshun came to the Yamei Palace again.

Jusetsu sniffed the air. "Something smells good."

"You look like a little dog," Koshun commented. He pulled a round piece of fruit out of his breast pocket. It was an orange with a yellow peel.

"This is a summer treasure orange. These are the ones that were still left on the tree in the Gyoko Palace garden."

"Did you pick them yourself?"

"I did."

Koshun placed the orange in Jusetsu's hands. It was too big to fit in just one of her palms. Its peel was rough and thick. When she brought her face closer to it, the citrusy, refreshing scent was even stronger.

"Don't oranges grow in the winter?"

"They do, but these are too acidic to eat at that time of year. If you wait until the summertime, their acidity is just right, and that's why they're a precious fruit eaten in the summer. They were discovered out in the provinces during my grandfather's reign and were gifted to him as a good omen. Apparently, it was a sign that the gods had given the Ka dynasty their blessing. That's why they're called summer treasure oranges—the 'summer' part is a reference to our name, as 'Ka' means summer."

"Oh," went Jusetsu. She was only half-listening to Koshun's explanation as she sniffed the fruit.

Oranges were generally a winter fruit, but this one definitely had a summery scent. It was the fresh smell of life, as if sunlight had been bottled up inside each one.

"Since its rind is so thick, you should get someone to peel it with a kitchen knife."

"Let me," said Jiujiu, who'd walked up to them—but Jusetsu shook her head.

"I shall eat it tomorrow. I'll leave it here overnight since the smell is so nice."

Jusetsu placed the fruit on the table and gazed at it. Its yellow

peel almost seemed to sparkle like the sun. Jiujiu recognized what she was meant to do and put out the incense that had been burning.

“How is your new bodyguard?” Koshun asked, sitting down opposite Jusetu. That must have been what he came to the palace to find out.

“He’s doing just fine.”

“Is he? I’m glad to hear it.”

“He and Onkei don’t seem to see eye to eye, though.” Jusetu glanced at Eisei, who was standing in wait behind Koshun. Eisei feigned ignorance.

“Is that so?” asked Koshun. “Do you want me to send over somebody else?”

“No, Onkei insists that won’t be necessary. I shall see how things go.”

“Tankai’s a skilled young man, but he’s also got a way with words and is always quick to hear about things that are going on. Still, he does have an erratic side.”

“He’s too self-indulgent. Oh well, it doesn’t matter. Actually, now that you mention him being quick to hear things—he told me that a ghost’s appeared in the inner court.”

“Oh, right...” said Koshun. By the way he was acting, he already knew about the rumor.

“Is it true?”

“I’ve never seen it myself. I believe some of my eunuchs have, however.”

“So, it is true?” Jusetu pressed.

“It hobbles around and doesn’t seem to have done any tangible harm. I’m leaving it be.”

But there *was* a ghost roaming around.

When Jusetu imagined the spirit of an aging manservant stumbling around alone in the darkness of the night, she felt sorry for him. “I’d like to make sure it’s really there,” she said.

Koshun seemed hesitant, and the face that he made wasn’t a positive one. “*Now?*”

“Don’t you want me to?” Jusetsu said, surprised by his reaction. “All this time, it’s always been you who brought all those ghost stories to *me*.”

“Well, yes, but...” Koshun looked at the piece of fruit on the table with a worried look on his face. “Didn’t you tell me you didn’t want to get involved with ghosts if you didn’t really need to?”

“I suppose I did...” said Jusetsu. She’d admitted that when they were dealing with the ghost possessing a cloth mask.

“That’s why I held back.”

“From telling me about the ghost in the inner court?”

“Yes.”

“You can be a little *too* considerate at times,” Jusetsu said with a frown.

Koshun stared hard at Jusetsu’s face. “Do you think so?”

“I do,” she responded. “I’m sure you’ve actually ended up angering people by being overly prudent, haven’t you?”

“There...might be *some* truth to that.”

Jusetsu had expected the emperor to be more arrogant and insensitive. Koshun, however, paid careful attention to what all kinds of people thought—to an extent that Jusetsu wondered if it might lead him to have a nervous breakdown someday.

“It’s time to direct a little of that consideration toward yourself.”

Koshun had a serious look on his face as he listened Jusetsu’s advice. “All right. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“It wasn’t *that* important.”

“I make sure to remember the things you tell me, though.”

“That is quite unnecessary,” she said. “Not even *I* remember every single little thing I’ve said.”

“I see,” said Koshun. With his face still blank, he tilted his head to one side, appearing slightly thoughtful.

His excessive earnestness is a problem as well, Jusetsu thought. She didn’t know when Koshun was going to relax, nor how she could get him to express his emotions.

“Right then, let’s go,” Koshun announced, standing up.

“Where to?” Jusetsu asked.

“You wanted to see the ghost in the inner court, didn’t you?” he answered.

That was when Jusetsu realized she’d forgotten that was what they were talking about.

The group left her palace building and made their way toward the inner court, located to the east of the Yamei Palace. Eisei took the lead, holding a light, whereas Onkei followed Koshun and Jusetsu. Tankai stayed behind to guard the Yamei Palace. Jiujui, on the other hand, had been given the task of acting as Jusetsu’s house-sitter—and was sulking about it, as one might expect.

“I heard that the ghost was that of some kind of servant from long ago.”

“It would seem that way. People say it walks around, holding up some sort of container.”

“It doesn’t sound like this rumor has been around for very long, does it?”

“No. This is the first time I’ve heard about it. Why would a ghost make an appearance now?”

Jusetsu wondered that too.

They went through the Ringai Gate, which connected the inner palace with the inner court. With the Gyoko Palace at its center, the inner court consisted of many different palace buildings. Not far from the entrance stood Goshi Palace, with Koshi Palace to the back of it. All of them were places that Jusetsu had set foot in before.

“Whereabouts has the ghost appeared?” she asked.

“People just say that it roams about, so it doesn’t sound like it has any fixed location. Some say they saw it near the mud-roofed wall surrounding the Gyoko Palace, while others have spotted it closer to the Goshi Palace. They can see it for a few moments, but then it disappears in a haze.”

The light ahead stopped flickering—Eisei had stopped in his tracks.

“Master. Look.”

Eisei’s voice was low, and he pointed to their left. It was a cloudy

night, so there was only a dim light from above. Underneath the faint, wavering moonlight, they could see the roof of a palace building. In front of it, there was a cold but charming plaza with polished cobblestone plates laid down on the ground—and standing in the corner of it was the ghost.

It was the image of a hunchbacked old man in a grubby hempen robe. His white hair was wrapped in a black headscarf, and he was holding up a small container in front of his face. He was hanging his head so nobody could see his face—but it was clear that his cheeks were gaunt. He staggered as he walked, taking one slow step at a time. He looked like he was dragging his legs behind him.

He wore a thick straw rope as a belt, tied around his short robe jacket. He wore tight-fitting, jodhpur-like trousers and nothing on his feet. The style of how his headscarf was wrapped around his hair and how it was tied up were different from how they were done nowadays.

He definitely did look like a servant from a long time ago.

The ghost kept on stumbling forward and Jusetsu drew closer to him. The way he was walking suggested that he wasn't intent on going to a specific location. Instead, he appeared to be aimlessly roaming about.

Even now that she was closer to him, Jusetsu still couldn't see his face. He appeared somewhat hazy and indistinct. The shape of the container he was holding was also undistinguishable.

Jusetsu pulled a peony flower out of her hair and blew on it. The pale red smoke encircled the ghost, making his image clearer.

The ghost's haggard, ugly face came into view. His hollow cheeks and sunken eyes, and even his wrinkles and blotchy skin, were now plain to see. The ghost had a look of exhaustion and sadness on its face, tinged with despair. His half-open lips were parched, and his skin was cracked, but there was no sign of there being any blood in them—they were stark white. The ghost's lips were trembling slightly, but as hard as Jusetsu tried to listen, no sound could be heard coming out of them. She thought he was holding up a container, but it actually looked like a little ornament—one in the shape of a turtle. The shaking hands he was holding it with were as frail as twigs.

The turtle ornament looked like it had been carved out of black stone, tinged with blue. It seemed to have a striped pattern on it.

“It’s the stone ao container...” Koshun whispered out of nowhere, from beside Jusetu.

“What is that?”

“That’s the stone ao container. It’s stored in the treasure vault.”

This object *was* used to store items in, after all. Since it was kept in the treasure vault, that meant it was one of the emperor’s treasures.

“The shell part is the lid. At first glance, it looks like an ornament.”

“Is there something inside it? Or is it empty?” she asked.

“I’ve been told that there used to be medicine in there. There’s nothing inside now, though. I think it originated from a dynasty long, long ago. The contents must have gotten lost at some point.”

“Medicine...”

Jusetu looked back at the ghost. His downturned face was still blank. Jusetu blew on it again and made the smoke disappear—taking the vision of the ghost with it.

“The treasure vault, you say?” she asked, looking up at Koshun.

“You want to go, don’t you?” Koshun replied before Jusetu had the chance to ask more directly. “I’ll have it arranged. I’ll send a messenger to you in the morning, just like we did before.”

“It’ll be Eisei, won’t it?” Jusetu said, taking a glimpse at the man. It was Eisei who came to pick her up last time she went to the treasure vault, after all. He arrived at the palace to fetch her with the most disapproving look on his face that morning.

“Yes,” Koshun replied curtly before turning back toward Eisei. “I’ll be counting on you.”

“Understood,” Eisei obliged obediently, since Koshun was in front of him...but the look he gave Jusetu was unsurprisingly disgruntled.

Eisei arrived at the Yamei Palace just as the sky had begun to turn white. He bowed—although it appeared that he was just going through the motions—and they swiftly began walking to their destination. Koshun wasn’t around, so his attitude toward Jusetu was plain to see. Jusetu had gotten so used to this side of him that she couldn’t imagine him acting friendly anymore.

“Eisei,” Jusetsu called out, looking up at him in front of her. “You sent Tankai to work for me *knowing* that Onkei didn’t like him, didn’t you?”

“Have there been any problems?” Eisei replied, not turning around.

“It doesn’t bother me if you try to make *me* feel uncomfortable, but I wish you’d spare Onkei.” Jusetsu silently wondered if Eisei disliked the fact that Onkei had gotten so close to her.

Eisei glanced at her. “After taking his abilities into consideration, I simply found Tankai to be the most qualified for the job. I’m sure Onkei understands that too.”

“You insidious fool.” Jusetsu glowered at him.

Eisei frowned, looking offended. “If Tankai isn’t to your satisfaction, I shall choose somebody else.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“It effectively was.”

Jusetsu fumbled over her words at that. The more she complained about the issue of Tankai, the more it sounded like she was saying Tankai was inadequate.

“You’re insufferable...” Jusetsu stated spitefully.

“And I feel the same way about you,” Eisei replied with an icy look on his face.

“Do you really need to be *that* straightforward about it?”

“You are not a consort that is stipulated in the administrative code, nor is your role listed on the inner palace registry. The ‘Raven Consort’ is not on the same level as any other consort. As a result, I do not believe I am required to show you the same degree of courtesy that I would reserve for the emperor’s other consorts,” Eisei stated. His words were smooth and decisive, and according to the rules, what he said *was* true.

Eisei looked down at Jusetsu coldly. “Did you think that you could get away with declaring that I’m insufferable and I wouldn’t be able to say anything back? Perhaps because I’m a eunuch?”

Jusetsu gulped and turned red. That was, in fact, the truth.

She bowed her head in shame. Eisei was right. She *had* assumed

that he wouldn't talk back because he was a eunuch—because he was her inferior. Although she always insisted that she didn't care about manners, those ideas were subconsciously ingrained in her.

I'm the insufferable one here, she thought.

"I'm sorry," she said at last.

Eisei stared at her before starting to walk again, without saying a word.

A short while later, however, he spoke up again. "It is true that I am an insidious and insufferable person."

After that, they walked in silence. Eventually, Eisei stopped in front of the Ringai Gate and turned around.

"Could you please stop making that miserable face?" he asked, his annoyance clear. "If my master gets wind of this, I'll be scolded."

"...I can't see what face I'm making. What do you mean, miserable?"

Eisei furrowed his brow. "You look like you're about to cry."

Jusetsu turned her face away. "No, I don't."

"Didn't you *just* say you couldn't see what face you were making?"

"I might not be able to see it, but I can still tell. I'm *not* crying."

"I said you *looked* like you were about to cry. Do you forget what people say as soon as they say it?"

"Argh... I don't want to talk to you anymore!" Jusetsu protested. She sounded like a child throwing a temper tantrum.

"Is that so? We're on the same page then," Eisei replied, his expression unchanged.

It was at that moment that Jusetsu realized there was no way she could measure up to Eisei when it came to making cutting remarks. It made it all the more clear that she was still just a sixteen-year-old girl—a sensation she never experienced when Koshun was around. When she was faced with Eisei, she was no more than a mere child.

An aging eunuch dressed in a cinder-colored robe was waiting on his knees in front of the Gyoko Palace's treasure vault.

It was the treasure vault's keeper, Ui.

“As I expect you’ve already heard, I want to see the turtle container,” Juseitsu requested.

Ui looked up. As always, his cheeks were ruddy and smooth despite his face being covered in wrinkles. He wore no expression on his face—another thing about him that was unchanging.

“Understood. Please come this way, Raven Consort,” he said, before opening the heavy-looking doors to the treasure vault as if they were nothing. She had wondered the same thing last time, but she simply couldn’t imagine where he mustered all that strength from.

Before they went inside, Juseitsu turned back toward Eisei.

“I know what you’re thinking. You’re going to tell me to take care not to break anything, aren’t you?” Juseitsu said before Eisei was able to caution her himself.

Eisei raised one of his eyebrow slightly, looking fed up. Juseitsu, feeling a little proud of the reaction she’d provoked, stepped into the treasure vault. Ui closed the doors behind them.

Inside the room, numerous treasures were stowed away in boxes lined up on shelves. A mural was painted across one of the walls, depicting the palaces of the gods, which were located far away, beyond the sea.

“Please take a seat over here, esteemed Raven Consort,” Ui said, before disappearing among the shelves. Juseitsu didn’t have to wait for long—he soon reappeared with a box. He reverently carried it over, placed it on a table, and opened the lid. He then took out a cloth parcel.

He carefully opened up the cloth to reveal the turtle container—the exact same one the ghost had been holding the night before. It was made from a smooth material.

“This is the stone ao container,” he announced before explaining further. “This kind of stone is called wave-patterned stone, noted by its beautiful striped patterns.”

The carvings had been made with painstaking accuracy. The patterns on the turtle’s shell—along with its eyes, mouth, and even the claws on its flippers—were represented in minute detail. Colorful gems had been set into its eyes.

“They’re made of amber,” Ui said of the eyes, as if he read Juseitsu’s mind.

“Can I touch it?” she asked.

“Of course,” Ui replied.

Jusetsu reached over to the shell part of the container and immediately lifted it up. It was empty inside.

“There used to be pills in there, once upon a time. Ones that could prolong your life,” Ui said. It didn’t sound like he was repeating something someone else had told him—it was more like he knew for a fact that they were once inside.

“Pills to prolong your life... Do you know anything more specific?”

“They were made from the crushed claws of a god.”

“What...?”

“The claws of a god,” Ui repeated calmly.

“A god... Do you mean Uren Niangniang?” she asked.

Ui shook his head. “No.”

Ui stared fixedly at Jusetsu’s face. Jusetsu couldn’t see any emotion in his eyes, but she still felt a strange sense of déjà vu. She had seen this face of Ui’s before...but when?

“Ui?” Jusetsu asked.

He blinked, then began to speak again. “The ao god. ‘Ao’ is a great sea turtle.”

“A great sea turtle...god?”

“Exactly.”

“Are you saying that the claws of that god were ground down into medicine, and then kept in this container?” Jusetsu gazed at the turtle container. “It was called the stone ao container, wasn’t it? Does that mean it was modeled after the great sea turtle god?”

“Exactly right,” Ui repeated monotonously.

“This originated from an ancient dynasty, correct? Koshun told me as much. When, specifically?”

“During the Hi dynasty, around 1,800 years ago, I believe.”

“1,800... That long?”

Jusetsu was surprised by the fact that such an ancient item was

still around, as well as the fact that the item was so well-made.

That means that the ghost...must be from a similarly distant period of history.

“Do you know how this container came into being?”

“An emperor from the Hi dynasty had a talented craftsman make it for him.”

It didn't seem like there was any other specific knowledge concerning the item's origin.

“Well, have you heard any ghost stories involving this container?” she asked. “Any stories about an old manservant haunting it, for example?”

Ui tilted his head slightly. “I'm not aware of any,” he replied in an unsurprisingly monotonous tone of voice.

“Is that so...” Jusetsu said, disappointed.

She looked at the turtle container again. Its amber eyes looked as if they were gazing back at her.

“The Hi dynasty and a great sea turtle god, huh...” Jusetsu whispered as she looked back into the turtle's amber eyes.

Jusetsu gave the container back to Ui, stood up, and left the treasure vault.

Once she'd returned to the Yamei Palace, Jusetsu decided to head for the Winter Ministry, but had to make a stop on the way.

“I wanted to go straight to the Winter Ministry, but Eisei told me I couldn't, so I came back first. He said it'd make too much of a scene if I were allowed to come out through the inner court gate. That man is so pigheaded,” Jusetsu grumbled as she got dressed into her eunuch uniform.

“You really don't get along with Attendant Ei, do you, niangniang?” Jiujiu said as she helped Jusetsu get changed. She laughed. “You're like a cat and a dog.”

“Which of us is the cat, and which of us is the dog?”

“Attendant Ei is the guard dog, and you're the fluffy little kitten.”

“The kitten...?”

“Yeah! You’re like a little kitten trying its very hardest to puff up its fur and look scary,” Jiujiu said. “Ishiha, you worked under Attendant Ei for a time, didn’t you? Was it hard?”

At the table, Ishiha looked up from his writing practice. He was expected to work on that whenever he had some spare time. Sometimes it was Jusetsu who taught him, sometimes it was Jiujiu, and sometimes it was Kogyo. On rare occasions, Onkei and Tankai gave it a go as well. At this time, Kogyo was watching over him.

“It wasn’t...*hard* as such. Attendant Ei is strict, but he didn’t say anything unreasonable. He just politely taught me everything I needed to know.” Then, in a quieter voice, he added, “He was a little scary, though.” It sounded like the boy felt bad about this additional comment.

“Oh, it sounds like he’s nicer than I thought,” Jiujiu said. “He’s always sharp-tongued with niangniang.”

“I’m never going to argue with him ever again...” Jusetsu mumbled grouchy.

“Because you’ll lose?” Jiujiu said bluntly.

Jusetsu glared at her, but Jiujiu just shrugged her shoulders back.

Once Jusetsu had finished getting changed, she came out through the curtain. Onkei was waiting for her outside the open doorway, and they left the Yamei Palace together.

“Onkei.” Jusetsu turned to him as they were walking. “Look where you’re going. I can’t have you falling over.”

After receiving this warning, Onkei swiftly drew close to Jusetsu. “What is it?” he said.

“What did you think of that ghost?”

“The ghost in the inner court?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Jusetsu had expected her question to bewilder Onkei, but to her surprise, he seemed to think it over with a meek look on his face.

“I think that man was a devotee.”

“A devotee?”

“He was dressed like a servant, but that wasn’t all there was to it.

I think everybody who saw him knew who he was devoted to, don't you? That was precise reason why they simply described him as the ghost of a servant."

"...What made you think he was a devotee?"

"This was simply the impression I got, but that man was single-mindedly fixated on one particular thing. That was the whole reason he was bowing his head," Onkei said. "The people who saw that ghost in the inner palace would have been eunuchs like me, so they would have been able to tell who he worked for and who he was so staunchly loyal to."

A devotee...but of whom?

"Thank you for that information. I appreciate it."

"My pleasure," Onkei replied curtly, before hanging back again—as much as Jusetsu would have preferred that he stayed by her side to chat.

The Winter Ministry was on the outskirts of the imperial estate. Inside it stood the Seiu Shrine, one dedicated to the worship of Uren Niangniang. When they entered through the gates, they could see that although the place was as dilapidated as ever, it had still been swept clean. As they were heading to the Winter Ministry building behind the Seiu Shrine, the Winter Minister, Senri, and his subordinates came out to welcome them. Senri showed Jusetsu to the outer passage where he had put out a table with a Go board on top. It reminded her of the time that Gyoei and Koshun had been playing Go in this same spot.

"Have you been playing Go with somebody?" Jusetsu asked.

"No, I've been by myself. I was remembering a game I once placed with Gyoei and thinking about what moves I should have made."

"In case you two have a rematch?"

He narrowed his eyes. "...I suppose so."

Senri, a man in his forties, was someone whose real personality contrasted considerably from the impression he gave off at first glance. He was tall and thin, and his gaunt face gave led him to have a sharp and nervous-looking gaze. However, he spoke in a gentle tone of voice and had a surprisingly cheerful laugh.

"How's your health?" Jusetsu asked. She gazed at Senri's pale face as she sat across from him at the Go board.

Senri was prone to illness, and even recently had been laid up sick as the heat and humidity had intensified. His cheeks looked even more hollow than they usually did.

“I’m fine. I appreciate your concern,” Senri replied. “When it suddenly gets hot, my body struggles to keep up.”

“You should take things easy and recuperate.”

“Thank you very much,” he said. “Was there something you wanted to ask me today?”

Senri was very perceptive. Jusetzu nodded.

“Are you familiar with the great sea turtle god?” Jusetzu asked, jumping straight into the topic at hand.

“Great sea turtle... You mean the ao god, don’t you? Also known as the Turtle Sovereign,” Senri responded readily. “In the olden times, many people used to believe in that god. The ruins of his shrines are dug up every now and then. There are still a few of them out in the provinces, but you could count the locations on one hand.”

“You seem to know a lot about this,” Jusetzu remarked.

“I’ve been researching folk religions and shrines in various locations for many years. Also, that god was worshipped as the god of longevity, so a shrine to the Turtle Sovereign was one of the ones my parents visited to pray for me...”

It sounded like Senri’s parents had visited shrines in different places to pray for their son’s recovery and to prolong his life, being as weak as he was.

“That’s why I have a small amount of knowledge regarding those sorts of gods.”

“I see,” Jusetzu responded with a nod. “Have you heard about a medicine made out of that great sea turtle god’s grounddown claws?”

Senri cocked his head, then shook it from side to side. “No... I don’t remember ever hearing of such a thing, and I haven’t read about it either.”

“I don’t know about the actual medicine itself, but the turtle container it used to be stored in is kept in the treasure vault.”

Jusetzu then told Senri about the ghost with the turtle container. Senri listening quietly to what she had to say without interrupting her.

“Apparently, that turtle container originates from the Hi dynasty,” Jusetu explained.

“The Hi dynasty?” Senri said. “That’s before Uren Niangniang’s time.”

The land of Sho had two histories—the official history that was spoken about openly, and then the story of the Summer Sovereign and Winter Sovereign that was never to be mentioned. The existence of the Winter Sovereign had been erased from the country’s official history. The two sovereigns had ruled the country in peace for five hundred years, but when the Winter Sovereign was out of the picture, the land of Sho was war-torn for generations. Many remains and artifacts from that era were destroyed, and there was almost no way to find information about older times. It was practically by pure chance that the few treasures from that time in the treasure vault were still around.

According to the official history, the Hi dynasty was simply one of many dynasties in the land of Sho. It was so far into the distant past that nearly everything that was recorded about it sounded like the stuff of legends. In other records, however, the Hi dynasty marked the end of the Summer Sovereign and Winter Sovereign’s history.

“Uren Niangniang came to this land after the Hi dynasty had fallen...”

That era really was “before Uren Niangniang’s time”—meaning that it was the last era before Uren Niangniang came over from the Secluded Palace. Jusetu didn’t know much about what happened before that. There was little information about it in the *Duo Encyclopedia of History*, which was kept in the Yamei Palace. From the perspective of the Raven Consort—or rather, the Winter Sovereign—the time before Uren Niangniang’s arrival was of little significance.

That said, things obviously had happened in the period of history between the territory’s formation from the corpse of a god and Uren Niangniang’s subsequent arrival.

“Is the container really from that far back? I’m impressed it’s lasted this long,” Senri said.

“It might be because it’s made of stone. What do you think about the ghost, however? I’m interested in who the man might be, but I’m also intrigued by why he’s appearing *now*.”

“That is intriguing...” Senri placed his hand on his narrow chin

and thought to himself.

“Do you have any ideas?”

“No.” For a moment, Senri had looked as if he was deliberating over whether to say something, but he ended up just shaking his head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t.”

“Oh... I thought you might know something, being as well-learned as you are.”

“You overestimate me. I am nowhere near as knowledgeable as Gyoei,” Senri said with a bitter smile. It had a look of nostalgia—and sadness—to it.

I’ve seen that kind of smile before, Jutsu thought—not on Senri’s face, but Koshun’s. It had been in the Koshi Palace when he too was talking about Gyoei.

Jutsu decided to stay quiet. She examined the look on Senri’s face instead. Senri then smiled at her, but it was a different smile to the one she’d noticed moments before—now it was a cheerful one.

“Does this mean you are hoping to save that ghost, Raven Consort?”

“...Yes, if I can.”

“If the man was a servant, he must have had a master. Perhaps the root of the matter has something to do with him.”

Onkei had said the ghost was that of a devotee as well. Did the key lie with his master after all?

“I may be more inclined to think this because I am the same way, but perhaps the servant’s master suffered from poor health as well. That could be why he was holding up a container with life-prolonging medicine inside...” Senri said. He trailed off and stared into the distance for a little while.

Every room in the Koto Institute was overflowing with literature. The shelves were filled with inscribed wood strips, bamboo scrolls, papyrus scrolls, manuscripts, and stacks of paper. The smell of ink was intense.

“The paper gets damp at this time of year, which causes some problems for us,” Meii commented as he showed Koshun into one of

the rooms.

It was silent inside. Just as Koshun deduced that there was nobody else there, a clattering sound came from the back. Meiin called out in the direction it came from.

“Shiki? His Majesty is here. Come.”

A young man appeared from the other side of the shelves. He stepped forward in front of Koshun and got to his knees in an easy, effortless motion. The man was probably about thirty-one or thirty-two, and he seemed more like the third son of a well-off merchant family than a competent official who traveled from one province to another for his work. He wasn’t astoundingly good-looking, but he still had a refreshing, kind appearance to him.

Going by the way Meiin described Shiki, Koshun had sort of expected him to be rugged and stubborn-looking. Instead, his first impression was that he appeared to be a rather pleasant man.

“Look up.”

Upon hearing this instruction, Shiki straightened himself. He had a meek look in his eyes, but Koshun noticed a hint of sadness there too. It was like a shadow of darkness was cast over them.

It suddenly occurred to Koshun that Shiki’s eyes resembled his own. He had a gut feeling about them.

This man is harboring hatred deep inside his heart.

Flames of smoldering hatred were burning behind Shiki’s eyes—the kind of anger that had no outlet.

He may not have had any basis for this assumption, but for some reason, Koshun felt confident about it.

Koshun seated himself on a chair and gestured toward the one opposite it. “Sit there,” he said, urging Shiki to take a seat.

Shiki glanced at Meiin, looking somewhat disconcerted.

“You can’t have a long conversation standing there,” Koshun added.

Shiki obligingly sat down in the seat.

“I hear you’ve been in Ga Province until recently,” the emperor started.

“Yes.” As brief as Shiki’s response was, his deep, mellow voice was clear.

“I want to know about the situation in Ga Province,” Koshun stated, getting straight to the point.

Shiki’s eyes opened a little wider. He seemed surprised to hear that. “Are you interested in Ga Province, Your Majesty?”

“Somewhat. Has an incident occurred there?”

Shiki looked away thoughtfully, then began to speak. “I don’t know whether I can call it an ‘incident’ as such, but...have you heard of the True Teachings of the Moon?”

Koshun gave him a small nod.

“A new version of that faith has spread throughout Ga Province.”

“The Eight True Teachings? Is that the new version of the True Teachings of the Moon?”

“Did you know about it already?” Shiki asked. “The new religion was founded by a former evangelist of the True Teachings of the Moon.”

Koshun stared at Shiki’s face. “You’re very knowledgeable about this.”

“I did my own investigation. That’s why I resigned from my position and left the province—I felt that my research put my own safety at risk,” Shiki explained with a gentle expression on his face.

“It wasn’t because your relationship with the Saname clan had deteriorated?”

“No, but it wouldn’t be entirely false to say that they had something to do with it. The Saname clan seems to be... How can I put this? *Shielding* the religion, in some way.”

“Is that so?”

“Well, they haven’t publicly revealed that they’ve converted, nor have they openly donated to it, so it’s not confirmed. However, it was when I was digging around for proof that I was poisoned.”

Shiki put this so casually that it took Koshun a moment to react.

“...Poisoned?”

“This is the first I’ve heard of that as well, Shiki,” Meiin said. He was also startled by this revelation.

Shiki, on the other hand, looked more or less unfazed. “It wasn’t the kind of poison that can kill you. It was just a threat. The Saname clan *are* poison-users, after all.”

“Poison-users?” Koshun repeated.

“This rumor only circulated Ga Province and didn’t make big waves, but it turned out to be true. You know the Saname clan are from Kakami, yes? It seems they have some kind of secret poison in their possession. There were some scary rumors claiming they got their hands on it by killing a god. I don’t know how much of that was true, however,” Shiki said. “But people say that’s why they fled to Ga Province—out of fear.”

“Well, that’s quite something...” Koshun said. He stared at Shiki’s face.

Shiki gave him a subtle, gentle smile in return. “Don’t believe it? Well, it’s not as if there’s any proof that the Saname clan administered the poison, and one could easily argue that I’m just overthinking it all, but...”

“No,” said Koshun. “I’m just wondering if the Saname clan trusted you. Did they believe you were the kind of man who would give in to their threat and run away?”

“They must have. That’s why I’m still alive now. But there’s also the possibility that they let me go to see what I do.”

There was another theory in his mind that Shiki was an agent acting on behalf of the Saname clan—but Koshun wasn’t going to voice that idea out loud.

“You worked alongside the Ga Province observation envoy, correct?” Koshun asked. “Were you following his orders?”

“No, I acted on my own authority. The observation envoy I worked with didn’t have any suspicions about the Saname clan.”

The role of observation envoy was under the direct control of the emperor, and as such, was appointed by him. Those appointed as the vice-envoy and all positions beneath that were chosen at the discretion of the observation envoy himself.

Why would Shiki, being the vice-envoy, have ignored the observation envoy’s wishes and acted on his own judgment? Did he have some other motive?

Koshun thought to himself. *I suppose I'm going to have to send a spy to Ga Province...*

Normally, the province chief or other officials who were dispatched from the central government would report any suspicious activity without Koshun having to lift a finger. This occasion, however, was different.

A non-stipulated official.

Had the real power been shifted to the observation envoy, leaving him unable to do his job properly?

Koshun gave Meiin a look, and Meiin nodded in return, appearing to have understood exactly what Koshun was asking of him. Koshun knew that he would make the appropriate arrangements.

"Were the events that occurred in Reki Province what motivated you to look into the Eight True Teachings?"

This sudden question scraped any signs of emotion right off Shiki's face. "Well, sort of..."

"You were from Reki Province originally, weren't you?"

"Yes," Shiki replied with a slight frown. It seemed like this was a topic he didn't like being asked about.

"Even I lost someone I knew in the uprising in Reki Province. He was...going to be my friend's husband," Koshun said. Kajo's face flashed in his mind. "We can't allow something like that to happen."

Shiki lowered his gaze. "I know. I agree."

Koshun got the feeling that the man had lost someone important to him too.

Koshun invited Shiki to the lotus pond, which was on the same premises as the Koto Institute. They walked along the passage, moving from one palace building to another, until they came out into the outer passage. There was a beautiful view of the pond there.

"They might have constructed waterways and sped up the transportation of goods, but Ga Province is still far away. I'm sure there are a lot of things we don't get to see, and a lot of voices we don't get to hear. It's difficult to get a grasp on what's going on with my own officials, let alone people in a place so far away," Koshun said in a calm

tone as he gazed at the semi-closed lotus flowers. “And Ga Province isn’t the only place where that’s a problem.”

“...This country is divided by mountains, after all.”

Koshun nodded. The imperial capital was located on the eastern part of the island, and the existence of rugged mountainous areas left many of the regions in the northern part unexplored. There was also a soaring mountain range in the center of the island, impeding travel between the east and west. They had chosen to build roads on relatively smooth terrain, but bypassing the mountain ranges meant that it still took a long time to reach the other side. The sea route was somewhat quicker, but it depended on the weather.

“It’s a very scary thing, analyzing information. Sometimes there’s no going back.”

Shiki nodded. “I know.”

“That’s why people like you, who keep an eye on what’s going on in different regions, are so important. Also, you’re not only knowledgeable about the government, but the citizens themselves. I could do with a few more such people.”

Non-stipulated officials, who were under the direct control of the emperor, were extremely useful in this way. However, they also had their downsides. It was hard to find the perfect balance.

“You take your role very seriously, don’t you, Your Majesty?” As impressed as Shiki was, his tone wasn’t one of surprise.

“I’ve thought about expressing opinions I wasn’t so serious about in the past, but I found it challenging,” Koshun replied, thinking on his chats with Jusetsu.

Shiki laughed, seemingly amused by this admission. “Have you, now?”

“Yes, but only because it was demanded of me.”

Shiki’s shoulders shook with laughter. He had a gentle aura to him, and he easily let his true character shine through, even around the emperor—but that didn’t mean he acted overly familiar with him either. He was just friendly and kind—and at the same time, sad. He had an atmosphere to him that all the other people Koshun had interacted with before had lacked. Was it because he’d picked up on that familiar sadness behind his eyes?

“...Who is it that you despise?”

Those words fell out of Koshun’s mouth on their own accord.

Shiki’s smile disappeared, and he wiped all traces of his expression off his face. His eyes clouded over. “Please rest assured, Your Majesty—it isn’t you,” he started. “Are you able to tell because...you hold the same kind of hatred that I do?”

Shiki stared into the emperor’s eyes as he said that, as if he was searching for answers inside them.

“The person that I despise...is no longer with us,” Koshun murmured.

Shiki narrowed his eyes sympathetically. “That must have left you with quite a void, Your Majesty.”

This man knows exactly what I’m going through, the emperor thought.

Koshun shifted his gaze toward the lotus pond. There was no breeze whatsoever and a stifling and humid heat was rising. It didn’t make him sweat, but it was just as excruciating.

I wonder what Jusetsu would have said if she were here now, Koshun found himself thinking.

“Have you ever seen a ghost?” Koshun asked instead.

As unexpected as the question was, Shiki replied almost immediately.

“I have,” he said. “I’ve traveled all over this country. I’ve heard all kinds of ghost stories in every place I’ve been to. Wherever you go, people love them—spooky stories and peculiar tales.”

“Is that right? You hear lots of different stories here in the imperial estate too. I’ve even seen ghosts myself.”

“Have you, Your Majesty?”

“Yes. They’re tragic things, ghosts.”

Visions of the ghost that possessed the jade earring, the spirit that lingered beneath the willow tree, and then the ghosts of his own mother and eunuch came to mind, before he let them go just as quickly.

“I saw a ghost as recently as last night,” Koshun went on. “It was the spirit of an elderly manservant—one that roams around the inner

court, holding an item from the treasure vault.”

“Treasure?”

“The stone ao container. It’s a turtle-shaped container that used to have medicine stored inside it. The ghost appears to be from the distant past, so who knows why it’s lingering about now...”

It was an unbearably pitiful sight to see that old servant doddering about, holding up the container in his hands.

After Koshun had explained what the ghost was doing, a dubious look appeared on Shiki’s face, and he clammed up.

“What is it?” said Koshun.

“Nothing, it’s just...I remember hearing a similar story out in the provinces.”

“A similar one?” the emperor pressed.

“This one wasn’t a *ghost* story, though. It was just a story about a pitiful old manservant. People say he was killed over some medicine...”

“What happened?” Koshun turned back to face Shiki, his interest piqued.

“I haven’t heard it in years, so I’m not sure whether I’m remembering it correctly... When I was working as an observation inspector in Raku Province, at the foot of the Northern Mountains and next to Reki Province, I heard it from someone who lived in that region.”

“Raku Province is where the royal capital used to be located long ago, isn’t it? During the Hi dynasty.”

“Yes,” Shiki said with a nod. “Back in the days when the royal estate was situated there, there was an old servant who worked for a certain nobleman’s family. The family had already experienced their downfall long prior, and the nobleman’s daughter and her old manservant were the only people living in the deserted house. The daughter was so unwell that she was bedridden, meaning that the few other servants that once worked for her had given up and left. However, this one old manservant did everything he possibly could to care for her and nurse her in her ill health.”

Shiki then continued. “One day, the old manservant heard that there was a miracle drug for prolonging a person’s life kept in the royal

estate—a holy medicine, stored inside a turtle-shaped container. So, he went to ask the royal family—who had very weak ties to the daughter’s family—whether they would share some of this medicine with her. The royal family accepted his request and gave him some of the medicine. The thing was, however, that it was fake. Irritated by the old manservant’s repeated visits, they foisted him off with a random medicine just to get him to leave. The daughter passed away. Once the manservant found out that the medicine wasn’t real in the first place, he reproached the royal family for what they had done. That infuriated them, and they ended up torturing him to death. After that, the royal family died of a mysterious illness...but rumor has it that it was actually the old manservant’s way of getting his revenge.” Shiki let out a sigh. “At least, that’s how the story goes... It’s one of the legends that gets passed around up there. I think parts of the story may have changed as time has gone on, but there’s something fascinating about it as it’s about a fallen dynasty.”

“You can say that again,” Koshun said, nodding. “I expect there might be some unexpected truths concealed in a legend like that one.”

A turtle container and a manservant...

“I better tell Jusetu,” he found himself murmuring.

“Jusetu?” Shiki repeated, cocking his head to one side in curiosity.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Koshun cleared his throat to distract from what he just said.

Koshun turned up at the Yamei Palace just as the sun was beginning to set.

He looks like he’s in a good mood, Jusetu thought upon seeing his face. His expression seemed the same as always, but somehow she still got that impression.

She didn’t expect the words that came out of his mouth. “I’ve heard a story concerning the turtle container and the manservant from someone who worked out in the provinces.”

“Is *that* what you’ve come to tell me?” Jusetu asked. “I was wondering what you were in such a hurry for.”

“It is,” said Koshun.

"I'm sure a letter would have sufficed."

"I wanted to tell you in person."

Unable to respond to this, Jusetu stayed silent.

It was still early, so Jiujiu and Ishiha were still around, not having been dismissed yet.

"Has your handwriting improved?" Koshun asked Ishiha.

Ishiha sat up straight. "Yes," he replied. "A little bit."

"There's no need to rush. Take it steady. I taught Eisei how to write, and now, he's a better writer than me."

"Really?" Ishiha looked up at Eisei.

"It's all thanks to my wonderful teacher," Eisei said. The eunuch wore a composed expression on his face.

"Ishiha is a quick learner, so he improves at an impressive pace. He's got a lot better at reading as well," noted Jusetu. Her praise made Ishiha smile awkwardly.

"I should bring him something to read. Something appropriate for his level," Koshun said.

"I already have what Kajo lent us. She brought over all kinds of things."

Jusetu pointed toward the cabinet, which had a pile of books sitting on top of it. When Jusetu had asked Kajo if she had anything that children could read, the woman happily brought them over on her own.

"Kajo does like reading, after all," Jusetu added.

"She does," Koshun replied with a nod. "I give her books from time to time. She prefers them to flowers or hairpins. I need to send her something new to read soon."

"She was saying she wanted to go and borrow some classics from the Koto Institute. She wanted to read some poetry," said Jusetu.

"All right. I'll grant her permission."

Consorts were able to leave the inner palace as long as they had permission. Kajo occasionally went to the Koto Institute or the historical archives to borrow reading material.

Jiujiu brought over some tea, and Jusetu joined Koshun in

drinking it. It felt a bit strange to be drinking a hot drink at such a muggy time of year, but Keishi—along with both Kogyo and Jiujiu—insisted that sweating helped get the heat out of your body. Jusetu begrudgingly agreed to drink it.

As they enjoyed their tea, Koshun told Jusetu the story of the turtle container and the old manservant that had circulated Raku Province.

“The old dynasty... Was that the Hi dynasty?”

“That’s right. It’s believed that their royal capital used to be located at the foot of the Northern Mountains.”

“The turtle container in the treasure vault was from the Hi dynasty, so...”

Was that old manservant spirit the ghost of the man deceived by the fake medicine and killed?

“It’s still a mystery why a ghost from that long ago would appear at this point in time, however,” Koshun said.

Jusetu nodded. “Indeed... I also heard that container apparently had the crushed-down claws of the great sea turtle god inside it.”

“The great sea turtle god?”

“Apparently, it was a widely worshipped god in the olden times. It would make sense if there were a considerable number of believers during the Hi dynasty too. When I asked Senri about it, he suggested that the old manservant’s master may have been in poor health. If the story you just told me is true, then his guess was correct.”

That didn’t give Jusetu a better idea of how to move forward, though.

“The medicine... Is he fixated on that?”

The ghost of the old manservant was holding up the container. Was he still after the medicine that he couldn’t get his hands on while he was still alive—for his master’s sake?

Jusetu pondered over this for a little while, then asked Koshun a question. “Can I visit the treasure vault again?”

“If you’d like to... Why?”

“I want to see if the medicine is there. It might not be in the container itself, but it could be stored somewhere else in the

treasure vault.”

“The great sea turtle medicine? I don’t think it was listed in the inventory.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean it’s not there. I shall ask Ui about it.”

“Hmm,” Koshun grumbled. “He is a peculiar keeper, I’ll admit that.” He nodded, then asked, “Do you want to go tomorrow morning?”

“He is. Well, Kajo said she was going to come here sometime before midday. She’s bringing new reading material for Ishiha.”

“In the afternoon, then. I’ll be able to join you that way, and it’ll make things easier.”

Jusetsu gazed at Koshun’s face. “I’m only asking, but why are you so willing to allow me into the treasure vault on so many occasions?”

“It doesn’t matter how many times you go in there,” Koshun said. “I don’t think of those things as solely my possessions to begin with.”

He was implying that they didn’t just belong to the Summer Sovereign, but the Winter Sovereign as well.

The look in Koshun’s eyes softened a little, giving his expressionless face a slightly kinder hue. “Also, I don’t mind you asking things of me,” he went on. “We’re friends, after all.”

Moments like that always left Jusetsu unsure how to reply. The only thing she was sure about was that his words made the inside of her chest feel slightly warmer.

The next day, Kajo arrived at the Yamei Palace carrying a few books. It was a casual visit, and she only had one lady-in-waiting accompanying her. Kajo was wearing a pale green robe, and she reminded Jusetsu of a refreshing breeze.

“Thank you,” Jusetsu said, taking the books from her.

“You’re very welcome,” Kajo responded cheerfully. “Since it was your request, amei, I put my all into choosing some. There are still some others that I didn’t bring, so if you want them, just say the word.”

Jusetsu found Kajo’s enthusiasm a little strange. “Won’t that be a nuisance for you?”

Kajo broke into a pleasant smile. "Not at all. I'm delighted that you turned to me for help."

"Is that why you look so happy...?"

"Of course."

Koshun seemed to like Jusetsu requesting things of him too. Jusetsu still didn't really understand how that felt.

"And here's something for you, amei," Kajo added, taking a jade green celadon container out of the pail her lady-in-waiting was carrying. It was filled with white honey-covered dumplings. Jusetsu's eyes were drawn to the sight, which made Kajo smile.

"Let's eat them together," said Kajo, her tone sounding just like a big sister.

Jusetsu, still captivated, nodded compliantly.

"...A ghost carrying a turtle container, you say?"

Jusetsu and Kajo were sat opposite one another, scooping up the slippery dumplings with spoons as they ate. The confections were covered in honey and were sweet, chewy, and delicious.

"And that's not all," Jusetsu continued. "Apparently, there's this old legend that gets passed around in the north about an old manservant who was killed." She was referring to the story Koshun told her.

Kajo had been listening carefully to what Jusetsu had to say and placed her fingers on her chin. She silently thought to herself for a little while.

"Is there something wrong with the story?" Jusetsu asked.

"You said it was a story that's been passed around, didn't you? Legends that are transmitted by word of mouth tend to take on lives on their own."

Jusetsu tilted her head to one side slightly. Kajo carried on speaking.

"A manservant who works for a formerly distinguished family dies after experiencing cruel treatment. He then gets his revenge from beyond the grave... I've heard variants of that tale in things I've read from time to time."

“Variants?”

“There are similar stories, I mean. It’s a fixed trope. There are probably stories like it told all over the place, and then they get written down and spread even further. The story you heard *might* have been the original, but there’s also a chance that it was different.”

“A different version...” Jusetsu hadn’t even considered that. “Are you saying that the story might not have much to do with the ghost in the inner court after all?” Jusetsu couldn’t hide the disappointment in her voice.

Kajo looked as if she was engaging in serious thought again. “Not exactly... The turtle container and the medicine are distinctive features to the story, so I wouldn’t say it’s unrelated. I would just advise against taking what you’ve heard as absolute fact when it comes to confronting the ghost. Give it some thought.”

“Hmm.” Jusetsu nodded. “I suppose so.”

“Please forgive me if I’ve overstepped,” Kajo added with a smile.

“Not at all,” Jusetsu responded, shaking her head. “It’s fascinating to me to hear another opinion on things. Talking to other people about these issues is interesting.”

Onkei had immediately proposed that the ghost was a devotee. Senri got the impression that the ghost’s master was unwell. Everyone had their own unique takes.

“Very interesting...” Jusetsu repeated softly.

That afternoon, Koshun came to collect Jusetsu in person—with Eisei accompanying him, of course.

As they made their way to the inner court, Jusetsu brought up what Kajo had said.

“I see,” Koshun responded, his tone indifferent. “There is some truth in what she says. Even written texts can be copied differently.”

“Also, I’ve been putting some careful thought into it myself...” Jusetsu started.

“What is it?”

“I think the medicine might have been poisonous.”

Koshun looked at Jusetsu from the side on. "Okay. And?"

"Even good medicine can be poisonous if you take the wrong dosage. While life-prolonging medicine might work on some people, it might actually leave others in worse shape than they were in before. Since ancient times, all medicines for prolonging your life or giving your longevity have been poisonous."

"Like those so-called elixirs of immortality."

"I don't know whether it's a medicine made from a god or not, but even if the royal family from that story *did* give him the real thing, who knows whether the sick daughter would have been saved. In fact..."

"It might have actually been what killed her?" Koshun suggested.

"Yes." Jusetsu nodded.

And not only that...

Jusetsu left it at that, and Koshun made no further attempts to speak to her.

Usually, only the emperor and eunuchs were allowed to enter and leave the Gyoko Palace, and as such, it was perfectly silent and still there—even in broad daylight. The cloudy sky seemed to suggest that a downpour was imminent, which was possibly why it was so gloomy inside the palace buildings, as well as abnormally bleak-looking despite the muggy heat outside. All Jusetsu could hear was their own footsteps on the stone floor beneath them as they proceeded down the passage.

When they reached the treasure vault, just as expected, they found Ui standing all alone in front of its doorway.

"I have been awaiting your visit," he said. He bowed his head deeply and placed his hands together in front of him.

"Is the medicine that was kept inside the turtle container still around somewhere?" Jusetsu asked, immediately after being invited inside the vault.

"It is not," Ui responded, his voice lacking in inflection. The look on his face was as unchanging as ever.

"Are you certain? There are some medicines from the olden days in here, aren't there? Isn't it with them?"

"It is not."

Ui rebuffed her point-blank.

Jusetsu let out a little sigh. “Oh. Then, let me ask you something else. Was that medicine suitable for a sick and frail person to take?”

Ui stared at Jusetsu for a few moments, beady-eyed. He was either unsure of what her intentions could be or simply racking his brains for an answer—she couldn’t tell.

At last, he tilted his head to the side slightly. “I do not have that information.”

“You said it was a wonder drug for prolonging one’s life, did you not? Was it the kind that could prolong *anyone’s* life, no matter who took it?”

“I do not have that information,” Ui repeated.

“You mean that there aren’t any surviving stories about anyone it was effective on, aren’t you?”

“I am not aware of any such stories.”

Jusetsu nodded. “Understood. Thank you. Would you mind if I took another look at that container?”

“Of course not.”

Ui whooshed away like a gust of wind and disappeared among the shelves. Before she knew it, he returned holding a box. His breathing was shallow.

Jusetsu picked up the turtle container and stared fixedly at it.

Koshun stared at it too, from the side. “It’s not a showy item, but it’s still a fine addition to the collection,” he commented quietly.

“Indeed, it is,” Ui responded. “This stone is made from a precious kind of rock sourced from the Northern Mountains. It was considered to be very hard and difficult to carve, but the best craftsman around at the time put his heart into soul into creating it, nonetheless. Its design is both intricate and understated at the same time, with...”

“Ui.” Jusetsu interrupted the eunuch as he reeled off the description like it was written on a piece of paper in front of him.

Ui closed his mouth and looked at her intently.

“There’s a ghost roaming about, holding this container. How do you think we could rid the spirit of its attachments to this world and move on to paradise?”

Questions could be answered with unexpected responses depending on who you asked. Jusetsu posed this question to him because she was curious what he would say—but the reply Ui came out with was succinct, to say the least.

“Break the container.”

“...What?”

Ui started to repeat himself. “I recommend that you break...”

“Are you telling me to break *this* container?” Jusetsu confirmed.

“Indeed.”

“But why?”

“If the ghost is carrying it, that must be what it’s attached to. If you break the container, that attachment will be no more.”

Ui’s was an extremely concise and brutal way of solving the problem.

“We...can’t do that. Can we?”

Jusetsu looked up at Koshun. Previously, she had asked him whether they could break the lute stored in the treasure vault.

Koshun was stumped, but it looked like the answer was a no. “Breaking it...wouldn’t be a good idea,” he said, as if it was obvious.

“Would it not?” Ui asked.

Jusetsu hadn’t expected the keeper of the treasure vault himself to recommend breaking one of the very treasures he looked after. Jusetsu gazed at his expressionless face. It was a different lack of expression from the one Koshun had. It was blank and lifeless.

“In that case,” Ui continued, his voice monotonous, “I recommend that you enlist the help of the ao god.”

“What?”

“Enlist the help of the...”

“No, I heard you—but what are you implying?” Jusetsu asked.

“You know the Goshi Palace, don’t you?”

“Erm, well, yes?”

“You should take this container to the Goshi Palace and give it as an offering,” Ui said.

Jusetsu glanced up at Koshun's face. It didn't look like he really understood either.

"Why would we do that?"

"Ao's shell is used as decoration inside the Goshi Palace. The 'go' character in 'Goshi' is yet another way of saying and writing 'giant sea turtle.' The power of the god lies within that palace."

Jusetsu was confused and at a loss for words for a few moments. "...What?" *The shell of the god?*

"I've never heard that before," Koshun said calmly.

"The first emperor, who created this imperial estate, was the one who arranged for it to be done."

"The first emperor from this imperial estate... The one from the Ran dynasty. Ran Yu?"

"You are correct."

"Why would he do that?"

"It acts as a defense against Uren Niangniang in case the worst should happen," Ui stated. "Just like the shamans. It's a sort of 'wall.'"

Jusetsu and Koshun looked at each other. *What did he mean?*

"He said that he couldn't feel at ease unless he had the power to fight back."

"*He said? Who are you talking about?*" *Was it Ran Yu?* Jusetsu wondered. "Ui, are you...?"

She took one step toward Ui. At that, Ui went quiet and simply looked blankly at the space in front of him, his vacant eyes not appearing to reflect anything he was seeing.

"Go to the Goshi Palace," Ui reiterated. He didn't seem likely to say anything more.

"Shall we?" Koshun asked Jusetsu after a pause.

Jusetsu thought about it and then nodded.

"There's still something I want to ask you later."

Jusetsu left Ui with these parting words and then departed from the treasure vault with Koshun.

They headed for the Goshi Palace, which was located near the

inner palace.

“Defense against Uren Niangniang...in case the worst should happen...” Jusetsu murmured as she hurried along.

What does that mean? Jusetsu thought. *What was Ran Yu thinking?*

The party climbed the steps and entered the building. It wasn't particularly large. This was the place they'd gotten the musician to play the lute and then sent the ghost haunting the cloth mask to paradise. Jusetsu hadn't paid much attention to the building itself at that time.

She looked around her. It had a cold stone floor, a few pillars holding up the beams, a divan, a table, and a folding screen.

Jusetsu drew her foot back with a start.

The stone floor.

There were polished cobblestones laid out beneath her feet, but that wasn't all there was to it. Here and there, the cobblestones were inlaid with what looked like a speckled shell material. It wasn't brown, but instead, it was light gray in color, making it difficult to distinguish it from regular stone. When Jusetsu looked at the floor as a whole, she noticed that the inlaid pieces of shell formed a large floral pattern.

Was *that* what Ui was talking about?

Jusetsu gazed at her feet as she walked to the center of the pattern. In the middle of it all sat a table.

“...Koshun.”

She took the turtle container from Koshun and placed it on the table. She stepped back slightly and lowered herself to her knees in the spot where she was standing.

She touched the flower pattern with her fingers. It was hard, but it wasn't as cold as the stone. Instead, it had a strange warmth to it. On top of that, something smelled fishy and damp.

“It...smells like the sea, doesn't it?” Koshun mumbled.

Jusetsu didn't know what the sea smelled like. Even so, it felt familiar—nostalgic, even.

She suddenly felt something wet on her fingers and moved her hand away in panic. The flower pattern was wavering. It had ripples in it.

Water?

The floral pattern rippled like the surface of a lake, emanating a faint silvery glow. Before Jusetsu had even processed what was happening, a pair of legs appeared behind the table she placed the container on. When she looked up, the ghost of the old manservant was standing there, hanging his head.

He was holding the container with shaking hands...and weeping.

Since Jusetsu was looking at him from below, his expression was clear to see. The ghost was crying.

"I'm sorry," a hoarse, feeble voice escaped his lips. He apologized again and again, sobbing as he did so. "Miss... Miss... This is all my fault."

Jusetsu could hear him constantly chastising himself in between his wails. She listened carefully to his words.

"I thought that taking the medicine...would save you..."

It was just as she'd thought.

Jusetsu gazed at the old manservant's face. "You made your master drink the life-prolonging medicine, didn't you?"

There was no response. It didn't seem like her voice had reached him.

"That means..." Koshun began. "The royal family probably *did* give him some of the real medicine. He had the sick daughter drink it, but rather than having her life extended, she ended up dying."

Jusetsu nodded. The old manservant had believed that drinking the life-prolonging medicine was all it would take to make the daughter better, and yet...

"It must have been too strong for her, with her condition being as critical as it was."

The person who'd shared the medicine with him must have meant well too. They must have sympathized with the desperate old manservant.

All Jusetsu could do was furrow her eyebrows and watch the old manservant sob away. There was no point in speaking to him—her words wouldn't get through to him anyway. What else was she supposed to do?

Jusetsu gazed at the floor. The parts of the flower pattern still had a subtle silver glow to them, making little waves.

Jusetsu gently brought her hand closer. "...Ao god."

Did the god have another different name? She didn't know and called out to it regardless.

"Will you save this man?"

She touched the shell with her fingertips. It didn't feel cold and had a warmth to it, like that of tepid water—like water warmed up by the sunlight. It swayed, and as it collided with Jusetsu's fingers, it sounded like water sloshing against her skin. The sensation was extremely familiar and brought with it a feeling of nostalgia—which made no sense, since she had no memories of it.

The sea.

Suddenly, Jusetsu's fingers were sucked by a powerful force. She wasn't being grabbed and pulled—she was being sucked into something. Her hand sank into the water.

Jusetsu placed her hand on the floor to resist the force, but the force was too powerful. She exhaled, but at that moment, she felt as if she was about to get swallowed up by it.

"Jusetsu!"

Jusetsu clung to Koshun's arm. She was finally able to let out the breath she was holding, but as she inhaled again, it pulled on her arm as hard as it could.

Let go of me!

As she willed desperately to be set free, her chest suddenly filled with heat. The heat flowed from her chest to my arms, and then from her arms to the tips of her fingers. The suction got weaker, and she pulled her hand away.

There was a blunt sound, like that of something popping, and Jusetsu and Koshun both fell backward.

"Master!"

"Niangniang!"

Eisei and Onkei had been watching the situation unfold and called out as they ran over to the pair.

Koshun casually raised a hand to keep the two of them back before he stood back up. He then supported Jusetu as he helped her to her feet.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Jusetu nodded. She was so out of breath that she still couldn’t speak. She placed her hand against her chest. That heat—she hated it.

She suddenly glanced over at the tabletop, and a small gasp escaped her lips. The container had split right in two. The ghost had disappeared from view. Even the flower pattern on the floor wasn’t made of glistening silver water anymore—it was back to normal.

“It’s broken,” Koshun said in an unaffected tone. That container was one of the emperor’s treasures. Everyone but Koshun was staring at the broken object in shock, holding their breath.

“If it’s broken, it’s broken. There’s nothing we can do about it now,” Koshun commented. Then, he posed a question to Jusetu. “Was the ghost able to disappear because the container broke?”

“Well...yes.”

There was no longer any sign of the ghost. The wailing had stopped too.

“Then that’s a good thing, isn’t it?” he asked.

It was all so simple. Jusetu let out a small sigh.

At that moment, a cinder-colored sleeve reached out and grabbed the container on the table. Nobody had even noticed him arrive.

“Ui?”

Ui was standing there holding the broken container, his face still devoid of expression. Jusetu looked at him, but she still couldn’t sense how he was feeling—nor his intentions.

“Wh-where did you just come from?” Eisei was unusually flustered. He looked to Koshun, seemingly unsure how to respond to the situation.

Koshun stood up. “Ui. As you predicted, the ghost disappeared when the container broke.”

“I know,” Ui responded in his monotonous voice.

Jusetu stood up too. She gazed intently at the old eunuch’s face.

She'd always felt like she'd seen his face somewhere before—but now she realized why. It wasn't his face she recognized. It was his *expression*.

"Ui, you're..."

It was the same vacant look that Shogetsu wore.

"You're a puppet... A vessel," she said.

His eyes—which looked like empty, vacant holes—looked toward Jusetsu. They were smooth with nothing reflected in them.

"You are correct," Ui said, as if this was something entirely trivial.

"Whose vessel are you? Uren Niangniang's? It can't be the Owl controlling you."

Ui cocked his head slightly. "Until recently, I was Uren Niangniang's vessel. Before that, I belonged to the ao god. The ao god was who created me."

The ao god's vessel?

"The ao god passed away, so I became Uren Niangniang's. But now, the ao god has summoned me once again..."

The flower pattern on the floor started to sway gently once again, emitting a silver light.

"That's where this part of the story ends. Uren Niangniang doesn't seem to have the strength to tie me down anymore, so it is now time for me to leave. I bid you farewell, Ran... Or rather, *Princess Hi*."

Ui's feet turned to water and his body sunk right down into the ground, starting from the bottom.

"I'm going away for a little while."

Ui and the turtle container he was holding were submerged in water. At the same time, the silver light disappeared, and the floor reverted to its previous state.

Everyone was silent for a few moments.

"...Did he just call me 'Princess Hi'?" Jusetsu said, her voice hoarse. "What does that mean?"

Koshun—whose voice was calm and steady, even at a time like this—was the one who responded to her question.

"The Ran clan originated from a minority tribe in the north, didn't they? Some people say that they were related to an old dynasty..."

Jusetsu had heard that too. They were said to be descendants of a clan that once ruled the country, or the descendants of priests. Did this mean Jusetsu was a descendant of the Hi dynasty?

Jusetsu thought to herself for a moment, then she shook her head. So what if she was? Being a surviving relative of the Rans was an inconvenient truth she had to live with, but the Hi dynasty was a dynasty from the ancient past. How much significance could *that* carry?

“Two things are for certain, however. We’ve lost one of our treasures, and the keeper of the treasure vault as well...” Koshun’s murmur carried the slightest hint of sadness in his voice.

That day, Jusetsu made her way to the Winter Ministry.

Jusetsu and Senri were sitting on opposite sides of a table in the outer passage. Jusetsu was giving the Winter Minister a full account of what had happened with the turtle container.

“The keeper of the treasure vault...?” asked Senri. “Really?”

“It was the great turtle god that created Ui, but that god ‘died,’ so Uren Niangniang took ownership of him instead. Now, he’s returning to the great sea turtle god again... What in the world could that all mean?”

Senri blinked, then gazed at Jusetsu’s face. “You said before that you were intrigued why the ghost of the old manservant would appear now. I was hesitant whether to say this or not at the time, but...now that you mention it...”

The man looked as if there was something he wanted to tell her.

“What is it?”

“...This is just a personal theory of mine, but faith...comes and goes in waves,” Senri began. His voice as gentle as the afternoon sunshine warming your skin. “You could even call them ‘fads.’”

“I know that.” Jusetsu nodded. She thought about the dilapidated Seiu Shrine and the religions dedicated to new gods that were cropping up all around the country. Religions simply came in and out of fashion.

“Why do you think people are deserting shrines to Uren Niangniang out in the provinces while belief in other gods is becoming more fervent? Why did the great sea turtle god, which people once had

faith in, become completely unrecognizable? In my view, I think that the gods are weakening.”

“Weakening?”

“If a god’s divine power weakens and it’s no longer beneficial to people, the adherents will drift away from their faith. It happens little by little, like a wave coming into the shore. People will then start believing in a god that has a different power. I personally believe that’s how gods come to be replaced.”

“Gods...are replaced?” Jusetsu asked.

“In fact, you could say it’s more of a struggle for supremacy. There are countless shrines to gods in this country, both big and small. I wonder if the gods are competing with each other, vying for power.”

Jusetsu remembered something Shogetsu—or rather, the Owl—had said.

“Kosho fed the Raven flowers. She did it again and again. But those flowers were poisonous.”

“The Raven has already...lost herself.”

Then, she remembered Ui’s words.

“Uren Niangniang doesn’t seem to have the strength to tie me down anymore.”

Was Uren Niangniang growing weak?

“So... If Ui went back to the great sea turtle god, could that mean it has regained its power?”

“There’s a high possibility of that, yes.”

“And Uren Niangniang, on the other hand...”

A solemn look appeared on Senri’s face. “My theory might not be correct,” he said. “But...I do believe that Uren Niangniang may have been in crisis once before.”

“What do you mean?”

“Long ago, the Winter Sovereign was killed. After that, war broke out. For a long time, no new Winter Sovereign appeared, and Uren Niangniang remained silent too. That begs the question, why? People say it was because the country had fallen into ruin, but that devastation was inevitable due to ongoing warfare. I, however, think that Uren

Niangniang's silence may have been because she was experiencing some kind of crisis as well," Senri said. "This is all just hypothetical, though. Nothing more than a theory I came up with."

"Don't worry... It's interesting to hear. After all, I'm not knowledgeable enough to come up with theories like that myself."

Senri narrowed his eyes at that. "Thank you very much."

"Raven Consort. Winter Minister," called one of Senri's subordinates, who had just shown up. "His Majesty has arrived."

"Oh? Does Koshun come and see you too?"

"Yes, on occasion. I play Go with him, now that Gyoei isn't able to anymore."

"I expect he's a challenging opponent, isn't he?" Jusetzu said.

Senri laughed. Jusetzu got the impression that he was up to the challenge. He must have been another skilled player.

"You're here too, are you?" Koshun said to Jusetzu once he was in the outer passage. "Do you play Go with Senri as well?"

There was a Go board out on the table that probably made him think that.

"No." Jusetzu shook her head. "I just came to get Senri's view on things."

"I see. Well, I've come to play a game with him."

Senri, however, gestured toward the seat he had been sitting in. "Why don't you play a game with the Raven Consort today?" he suggested.

Jusetzu scowled. "I have no interest whatsoever in playing with that fool."

"She's a competitive one," Koshun explained with an unconcerned look on his face—the kind of face that Jusetzu hated.

"You don't think you can lose, do you?"

"I'd be my pleasure to lose to you," Koshun said.

Jusetzu had the urge to throw a stone right at him.

"Sit down," she replied.

Jusetzu pointed at the seat opposite her. Then, she took the lid of

the container and grabbed hold of a stone. Koshun meekly sat himself down. Senri smiled, gave the pair a slight bow, then quietly left them to it. Jusetsu watched him walk away. The man was wearing the same dark gray robe that Gyoei always had, but he looked so different in it.

“...It’s helpful to ask for other people’s opinions on things,” Jusetsu remarked.

“It is.”

“Now I realize just how little I truly know.”

“I see,” replied Koshun.

“Actually... There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you about for a while.”

“What is it?”

Jusetsu got straight to the point. “Gyoei’s dead, isn’t he?”

Just as Koshun was about to put a Go stone down, his hand froze.

“Going by the way you and Senri have kept it a secret, I don’t think he died of old age,” she continued. “It was suicide, wasn’t it?”

Koshun said nothing.

“That means he took responsibility for something. Was he the one who let Shogetsu into the inner palace?” Jusetsu was saying this all so calmly that she even surprised herself. “He despised me, didn’t he?”

Reijo came to her mind. She lived alone, just as the Raven Consort was supposed to. That was how she grew old, and that was how she died.

“I knew it,” she said.

“...Jusetsu.”

The sound of Koshun quietly calling out her name was something that rattled the very depths of Jusetsu’s heart. It always did, but this time, it resonated even deeper and stronger. She felt a burning pain inside her nose, and she caught her breath.

“I told you, didn’t I? You’re too considerate. You anger people by being overly prudent.”

“You...did say that, yes. Are you angry?” Koshun asked calmly.

Jusetsu shook her head. “You’re considerate of my feelings, but... who’s going to be considerate of yours? Were you just planning on not

telling anyone how painful it was to lose Gyoei and shutting those feelings away?"

If he did that, his wounds wouldn't have the chance to heal.

Koshun paused. "There are plenty of people who are considerate toward me. I'm the emperor."

This wasn't really true. Jusetsu felt a pain deep inside her heart—the pain she felt for Koshun.

"You accept getting wounded as if it's inevitable. You think it's the punishment that you deserve. I used to feel the same way. But now..." Jusetsu paused and looked down at the Go stone in her hand. "A short while ago, I rid a lady-in-waiting in the Hakkaku Palace of a curse."

Koshun nodded.

"That lady-in-waiting's fiancé had saved her life, but she regretted having left him to die. But then I realized that by feeling that regret, she was rejecting her fiancé's decision to put his life on the line to save her. And then..." Jusetsu exhaled. "I don't know how to word it properly. It's just... I don't want to disavow the choice my mother made back then. That's why..."

She tried to go on, but she couldn't quite find the right words.

"I see," Koshun said softly. It seemed like he understood what Jusetsu wanted to say. "That's a good point..." He said no more than that and simply stared at the stone.

"I never used to view mixing with others as a positive thing." Jusetsu placed her stone on top of the board. "But now I know better—there's so much you can learn from interacting with people."

Even if this is the wrong path for the Raven Consort to go down, she thought to herself. Just because something I did something with good intentions, that doesn't mean it will necessarily bring about a good result. Perhaps this was all a mistake. Perhaps I'm falling into a dark hole, one little bit at a time.

Still, Jusetsu couldn't bring herself to regret the connections she'd made.

When she got back to the Yamei Palace later on, a familiar lady-

in-waiting was there. She didn't have a white coral hanging from her belt anymore, but it was still Ki Senjo.

"I've come to deliver a letter from the Crane Consort."

Senjo was holding a tray with a letter atop a grandiose-looking brocade cloth.

"What might this be about?" Jusetsu said. She picked it up and opened it.

Being the Crane Consort, she had beautiful handwriting. In contrast to the strange impression she gave off, her words were extremely polite and humble. The message she'd sent, however, was simply an invitation to tea.

"She didn't need to go out of her way to send me a letter like this..."

Senjo didn't appear to know what the letter was about and looked taken aback.

"She requested that I obtain a response from you. Would you be so kind as to give me a letter to pass along?"

Jiujiu started crushing some ink on the inkstone. Jusetsu wasn't sure how to reply. However, that was when Senjo's tray caught her attention. A turtle shell emblem was embroidered into the brocade cloth with gold and silver thread.

"Turtle?" Jusetsu muttered, prompting Senjo to look down at the tray.

"Oh, this cloth? It's one of the very finest that the Crane Consort owns. At first, the Crane Consort wasn't sure about it as she didn't think turtle shell emblems were very cute—but after much deliberation, she chose this one. She said that ones with flower patterns dyed on them were too casual. She couldn't find any other brocade cloth that was to her taste."

"And so, she sent it with this one piece of cloth."

"Since this is the first letter she's sent to you, she was very worried about what to write as well. She really wants to be your friend, you see."

That was unexpected. The impression Jusetsu had of her was that she was just a confusing little girl.

“Not a crane, but a turtle,” Jiujiu, who was grinding the ink, interjected. “Since it’s a letter from the Hakkaku Palace, I thought she’d make a habit of using things with crane emblems on them.”

“She tends to use turtle shell emblems. Our ladies-in-waiting like to have that pattern on their ruqun too, with it being the emblem of Hakumyoshi and all.”

Hakumyoshi—the god the Eight True Teachings faith worshipped.

Just as Jusetsu picked up her brush, she lifted her head. “Turtle patterns are the emblem of Hakumyoshi?”

“Yes. After all, Hakumyoshi *is* the great turtle god.”

Her brush rolled across the table and fell on the floor.

*The Hand
Pulling
the Sleeve*

INSIDE THE IMPERIAL ESTATE, there were several historical archives

where classic texts were kept. The Koto Institute was one such place, and the institute's collection contained a number of the most valuable books around. While some of these were simply records of foreign laws and historical texts for the reference of the institutes' scholars, there were also a variety of elaborately bound manuscripts and rare novels telling supernatural tales.

"Have you been to the western territory?" Koshun asked Shiki. They were in one of the rooms in the Koto Institute.

The country was separated in the center by mountain ranges and had long been roughly divided into eastern and western territories—and referred to as such. The imperial capital was located in the eastern territory, whereas places such as Roko—where the Hatan clan, the clan that Ishiha belonged to, lived—were located in the western territory.

"I've been to Do Province and Gei Province. In Do Province, I worked as the western moderation clerk, whereas in Gei Province I was the observation judge."

Shiki had a gentle face and spoke in a low voice that was mellow and smooth. Just like the shadow of gloom that was cast across his face, however, his voice was tinged with a hint of sadness.

"Do Province? It must have been difficult out there," Koshun remarked.

That province included an island where people were exiled to. There were several other small islands as well, but they were difficult to manage and govern. The currents in the surrounding waters were choppy, and the climate was said to be severe too.

"I coped with the cold winters," Shiki replied, nodding. "The extreme winds make it difficult for crops to grow, but iron production and crafts are flourishing. Many of the woodworkers and tatara ironmakers are hooligans, so no book-smart official can compete with them. That said, the soldiers aren't able to keep them under control by themselves."

"Is the moderation envoy over there doing a good job?"

"The incumbent moderation envoy when I was called to my post

was a cultured military officer. And I've heard that the current moderation envoy has a good reputation."

"I see," Koshun said with a nod. He was the one who appointed that moderation envoy. "Roko is in Gei Province, isn't it? That's where the Hatan clan are from. A few of my eunuchs originate from that clan."

"It's...not a particularly wealthy area, so that doesn't come as a surprise." Shiki lowered his gaze wearily. "They're unable to provide for their children, so they let them go. The adverse effect of this, however, is that they end up with fewer workers to provide for future generations—as such, they remain in poverty. It's a vicious circle. Seeing the brokers coming to purchase young boys to make eunuchs out of is not a very pleasant sight." Then, Shiki seemed to remember it was Koshun he was speaking to and suddenly looked up. "You'll have to excuse me."

"It's all right..." the emperor said.

Ishiha's face came to mind. He was still a young child, only around the age of ten. Eisei must have come to the inner palace when he was around the same age.

"On the whole, the western territory is poorer than the eastern territory. And yet I hear that in the past, they had good catches of fish—enough for them to afford to build palaces," Shiki noted.

"That's right. Ishiha said the elderly used to reminisce about those days quite frequently..."

"Ishi...? Is that somebody from the Hatan clan?" Shiki was able to tell just by how his name sounded.

"He's a eunuch from the Hatan clan. He was in the Gyoko Palace for a short while. He works for the Yamei Palace now, though."

"The Yamei Palace..."

It was possible that Shiki—having only just come to the imperial capital—didn't know anything about the inner palace. Koshun was about to give some further explanation, but before he got the chance, Shiki said something else.

"Is that where the Raven Consort lives?"

"Oh? Did you know about the Yamei Palace already?" said Koshun.

"Not exactly. I found out about it since arriving here. When I was

out in the provinces, I knew nothing of her existence at all. Is it true that she can take on any task, be it locating things or carrying out curse killings?”

“Well, something like that...” Koshun had never seen Juseitsu carry out a curse killing, so that part seemed unlikely.

Shiki looked thoughtful. “You see...” he began, but right at that moment, Eisei appeared with an announcement.

“Master, the Mandarin Duck Consort has arrived.”

“Oh, has she? I didn’t realize she was coming today.”

Koshun had given Kajo permission to come to the Koto Institute since she wanted to borrow some reading material.

Kajo entered the room, accompanied by a few of her ladies-in-waiting and eunuchs. She was wearing a grayish-blue robe, which was a refreshing sight. The dangling accessories in her hair made clear rustling sounds as she moved.

“You wanted to find some poetry, didn’t you, Kajo?”

“Yes, but I’ve already borrowed those. This room is where the copies of the picture scrolls from Kakami are located, is it not? I’d like to take those home with me. I want to have a look at them along with the Raven Consort and her assistants,” Kajo replied. Juseitsu was Kajo’s favorite person as of late.

“The picture scrolls from Kakami?” Koshun looked at the rows of shelves. “Now, where were they again...?”

“I shall bring them to you,” said Shiki and he scurried away. It looked like he knew exactly where to find them.

When Shiki returned carrying several picture scrolls, Kajo thanked him. “Why, thank you very much. Are you a scholar? I don’t believe I’ve seen you before.” Being a frequent visitor to the Koto Institute, she recognized the scholars that worked there.

“My name is Reiko Shiki. As of yesterday, I have had the privilege of being appointed as one of the institute’s scholars.” Shiki placed his hands together in a polite bow.

“Is that so? Where were you before that?”

Koshun interjected and answered for him. “He was in Ga Province,” he said.

“I was working as the observation vice-envoy in Ga Province, but I was born in Hosui in Reki Province,” Shiki elaborated.

Shiki’s answer made the smile on Kajo’s face stiffen for a brief moment.

“I see,” she said, beaming again. “Well, I shall take a look at these and decide which of them I would like to borrow.”

With that, Kajo moved over to the long table at the back of the room. Her eunuchs followed after her, holding the picture scrolls.

Shiki watched them as they shuffled away. “Should I have avoided mentioning Reki Province?” he asked Koshun.

“Not at all,” said Koshun. “It’s just...she lost somebody she knew in Reki Province.”

The emperor left it at that and glanced over at Shiki. He was shrewder than he’d expected when it came to showing off his competency and selling himself in front of a consort.

“Putting that aside...it looked like you were about to say something earlier?”

“Oh, yes...” Shiki lowered his gaze. “Do you think, by any chance, that the Raven Consort would take a request from somebody like me? Or does she only listen to ones from members of the inner palace?”

“You have a request for her?” Koshun was a little surprised. For some reason or another, Shiki didn’t seem like the kind of person who would turn to someone like the Raven Consort for help.

“Yes,” Shiki replied, rubbing his arm. His expression was gloomy and there was a dark shadow cast across his face.

“...Let’s see what she has to say. What is your request, by the way?”

Shiki darted his eyes about the room, hesitant to speak. “I’m sure you’ll think this sounds stupid,” he began reluctantly, “but I can see a hand pulling at my sleeve.”

Jusetsu sat in her chair and stared at the man kneeling before her—Reiko Shiki. At first glance, he didn’t look like an official. Jusetsu hadn’t actually seen enough officials to make such a judgement, but the ones she *had* seen were nothing like this. Officials tended to have a

coldness to them—not a coldness of attitude, but rather of intellectuality. It was if they used their knowledge to hone their sense of rationality.

Shiki, on the other hand, didn't have that sort of air. He had a gentle look in his eyes, and his healthy-looking complexion—as well as his attire—gave off an unsullied impression. He looked rather friendly. Still, for some reason, the young man felt like he had a dark shadow hanging over him. There was a crispness and a loneliness to it, like a shady spot on an early spring day.

Why is this man here, in the imperial estate? He didn't look as if he had the guts to work for the sake of his country, nor the ambition to make a name for himself. He just seemed extremely sad.

This man is dangerous, Jusetsu thought.

As she sat there with a frown on her face, a eunuch offered her a heaping glass bowl of lychee fruit. Their red skins were half peeled off to make them easier to eat. Jusetsu took the skin between her fingers and popped the white pulp into her mouth, letting the lychee's sweet fruit juices pour out over her tongue.

Jusetsu looked diagonally across from her, where Koshun was sitting. He had no expression on his face and sat in a relaxed manner, reclining casually on his armrests. Nobody said a thing. The rain outside sounded terrible but was only audible when no one was talking.

The group was inside the emperor's detached palace, was located in the imperial estate's eastern woodlands. It had both a garden and a pond, and even a tall, multi-storied building. Under normal circumstances, Jusetsu would have simply enjoyed these views, but the rain shower that had started just a moment earlier made them impossible to appreciate. The downpour was so heavy that it seemed as if their pavilion was going to end up underwater.

Well, perhaps it'd stop before it got to that point, but still...

In the face of such a storm, there was nothing anybody could do apart from wait it out. Jusetsu had come there after Koshun demanded that she meet a certain scholar who apparently had a request for her. As a result, Shiki was the focus of Jusetsu's observation.

A hand pulling at his sleeve, is it?

All it took was one glance for her to know exactly what he was

here for.

A white hand had abruptly taken hold of Shiki's right sleeve. It was a woman's hand—pale and slender. It didn't pull hard on his sleeve, but it didn't clasp on to it, either. Instead, the hand would just hold onto it, helplessly. The only other thing one could see was a glimpse of pale-yellow sleeve with a small floral print on it. But truly, there was nothing else attached to it. It was just a hand, and nothing more.

At long last, the rain slowed down and began to show signs of stopping. That was when Koshun began to speak.

"This man says that he can see a hand pulling at his sleeve..."

Juetsu nodded. "A woman's hand, isn't it? A woman wearing a pale-yellow jacket with a small floral pattern."

Shiki stirred uncomfortably in his seat, startled. "How did you know?"

"She's pulling at it right this very moment. She seems timid, however."

Shiki exhaled. "I can only see it now and then. I didn't think it was visible to anyone else..."

He admitted that whenever he checked, others saw nothing. He naturally assumed his eyes might have been playing tricks on him.

"I can see some ghosts immediately, but others remain invisible to me no matter what I do. I suppose you could say it depends on our 'compatibility,'" Juetsu explained, before taking another glimpse at Shiki's sleeve. "The owner of that hand appears to be very worried about you. You must have an idea who it could be—it was someone close to you. I expect you might know *why* they're worried about you as well, so I don't think I have much of a role to play here."

Shiki's eyes widened. "You could work out...all of that?"

"I am able to use my abilities to force ghosts to show themselves. Is that necessary here?"

"No," said Shiki, shaking his head. "Both the sleeve and the hand look familiar. The hand in particular... There's no mistaking it. It's Shomei. My stepsister."

"Your stepsister?" Koshun whispered, as if he were making sure he heard correctly.

“I just think of her as my little sister, although we weren’t actually related by blood. As you might know, I was an orphan—and so was she. We orphans stuck together, because otherwise, we wouldn’t have been able to survive.”

Shomei was three years younger than Shiki, and she couldn’t be relied on for anything. As he said, he thought of her as his younger sister, taking it upon himself to take care of her and help her out.

“Shomei used to call me ‘big brother,’ and she adored me. There was a professor in the town I was born and raised in—he used to gather us orphans together and teach us how to read and write. I was fortunate enough to catch his attention because of how well I did in his classes. This led to my family, the Reiko family, taking me in. I used that opportunity to ask if they would adopt Shomei too. The couple must have thought it would be nice to have a daughter as well as an heir, because they obliged and took us both in together.”

“You have kind parents,” Koshun commented.

Shiki smiled slightly at that. It was an affectionate and wistful expression, enough to show exactly how he felt about his adoptive parents.

“I do. They’re wonderful. They were never well-off, but they couldn’t bear to separate us. I’ll never be able to repay them enough for that. But...what happened to Shomei brought them much sorrow.” Shiki’s eyes clouded over. “She married into a family from the neighboring town. They were some of the wealthiest landowners in the area, and her husband and his parents were kind people. Our family were pleased with our luck. It wasn’t until a few years later, however, that her husband’s family started acting strangely. Perhaps their good nature was taken advantage of. They started believing in the True Teachings of the Moon, which was popular at the time, and Shomei was the only one who was against it. Apparently, they even made large donations to the faith... She advised them against it countless times, but her husband and his parents wouldn’t listen to her. Sometimes, she’d send me letters asking what she should do, but I was working in another province those days, so there was no way I could just run back home. I regret that now—I should have gone back, regardless of what I had to abandon in order to so.”

Shiki frowned at that. It seemed like telling the rest of the story was going to be extremely painful for him.

“If it hurts to talk about...you can leave out the details. I only need a rough idea of what happened,” Jusetzu said.

Shiki gave her a little nod. He clasped his hands against his mouth and was silent for a few moments. Then, he let out a breath and continued telling his story.

“To this day, I still can’t understand why her husband’s family did what they did. They were so kind and good-natured... Maybe that’s just what religion does to you. One day, Shomei’s father-in-law and her husband’s other relatives urged her to convert to the True Teachings of the Moon. This had happened many times, but she’d declined every single time. On this day, however, it didn’t stop there. It developed into an argument, and before long, things turned physical. In the end, they beat Shomei to death with a stick. I was later told that they’d been shouting about how they would drive out all the evil within her with that stick. They were immediately arrested and executed. By the time I got home, Shomei was already inside a casket. They’d waited for me to get home before they actually buried her. It was hard to tell because of the makeup they’d put on her, but her body was covered in wounds, even her face... This was just a few months before the True Teachings of the Moon was wiped out in the uprising.”

Shiki hung his head and looked down at the ground.

“I started noticing the hand about six months after Shomei’s death... The robe with the small floral pattern was one I bought for her, many years ago. It was her favorite. I didn’t have it made out of new textiles—it was secondhand—so it was really nothing special... I would have recognized it was her immediately regardless of what robe she was wearing though. When she was little, she used to hold on to my sleeve, acting all forlorn. Her gentle, timid way of holding onto me hasn’t changed in the slightest. It feels just like she’s still here with me. Sometimes, I want to reach out and grab hold of her hand...” A sad smile came to Shiki’s face. “As helpless as she was, however, she always seemed worried about *me*. I used to tell her she should worry about herself before she bothered worrying about other people, but I suppose it was just in her nature.”

“Do you think that’s the reason she’s still pulling at your sleeve...?” Jusetzu asked.

Shiki bowed his head. “It must be, mustn’t it?” he responded with a nod. It was as if he was trying to persuade himself of that.

Jusetsu stared at his face in silence.

"I would like to ask if you can send Shomei over to paradise. I feel terrible for her, being like this."

"If Shomei had nothing to worry about, she'd be able to get to paradise right away without me even lifting a finger," Jusetsu said. "The thing that's holding her back can be found within yourself."

Shiki probably knew exactly what it was. He wasn't willing to talk about it though—which made it impossible for Jusetsu to know for herself.

The man bowed his head, not saying a word. Jusetsu glanced at his waist. There was a decoration hanging from his belt, and it had been weighing on Jusetsu's mind since she first laid eyes on him. It was a white coral hanging decoration—the kind that followers of the Eight True Teachings wore.

"You said you were the observation vice-envoy in Ga Province or something, didn't you? Do you believe in the Eight True Teachings?"

"No," Shiki replied curtly.

"Then why do you have that hanging from your belt? It's proof that you believe in the Eight True Teachings, is it not?"

"This..." Shiki touched the white coral. "This is to aid my research into the Eight True Teachings and the Saname clan."

"Shiki said he was poisoned while he was looking into the connection between the Eight True Teachings and the Saname clan, over in Ga Province," Koshun interjected.

Jusetsu glanced in the emperor's direction.

"They may have let me get away for a reason. I'm sure there are believers inside the imperial estate too. I wear this to put them off the scent."

This gave Jusetsu an unpleasant sensation, like something was sizzling and burning against her skin. It was evidence of the wariness she felt toward the Eight True Teachings. Hakumyoshi was apparently the great sea turtle god. Was it really the same god that people used to believe in many generations ago?

She thought back on what Ui had said before he disappeared.

"But now, the ao god has summoned me once again..."

It *had* to be the same god. This ancient god had gotten its power back—faith in it had experienced a resurgence in the form of the Eight True Teachings.

Jusetsu had a bad feeling about it all.

“...Are you still investigating it?” she asked.

“What?”

“Are you still investigating the Eight True Teachings and the Saname clan?”

“Yes,” Shiki said with a nod. It was almost as someone had asked him the most obvious question in the world. “I can’t just leave the Eight True Teachings be. Things will most certainly end in disaster.” He paused. “That religion must be destroyed.”

His voice was gloomy and sounded like it was echoing from the shadows. *I see*, Jusetsu thought. *So that’s what his heart is set on.*

“Do you despise the Eight True Teachings?” Jusetsu asked.

Shiki silently stared fixedly at Jusetsu in the eyes. There was a dark flame blazing away inside them.

She continued. “I heard that the Eight True Teachings is the new version of the True Teachings of the Moon.” Jusetsu had heard that from Koshun.

“Yes,” Shiki replied. “The man who encouraged Shomei’s husband’s family to convert to the True Teachings of the Moon... He was the man who founded the Eight True Teachings—Hakurai.”

Shiki uttered these words with a level of contempt that seemed unbefitting of a face as gentle as his.

“He’s the man who taught them if someone was possessed by evil, beating them with a stick would cure them.”

He *despised* that man.

Jusetsu averted her gaze from Shiki’s and looked at the pale hand that was holding onto his sleeve. *This must be what’s troubling Shomei*, Jusetsu thought to herself. The spirit was worried about the hatred that Shiki held. Shomei was worried that his hatred would burst into flames and transform into the beast known as revenge. He could go haywire.

Until Shiki gave up on his revenge and let go of this hatred, Shomei wasn’t going to make it to paradise. She couldn’t leave his side

and would instead hold on to his sleeve forever in an attempt to hold him back.

Juetsu looked over at Koshun. His face was as expressionless as ever, so she couldn't read what he was thinking.

"Still, there's nothing that I can do. I could forcibly tear Shomei away from you, but that wouldn't be sending her to paradise. If you want her to go to the Secluded Palace and eventually become a soul that roams the river of stars, then you must rid her of her worry."

The souls of the dead were guided to the Secluded Palace, which was said to sit at the edge of the distant eastern sea. Then, a long time after they arrived there, their souls would be swept away into the stream that flowed out of the Secluded Palace—a river in the night sky. For the sea-dwellers, the sky was not what stretched out above them, but the sea itself. The stream was a passageway to carry souls from beyond into that sea. The souls that flowed through it became twinkling stars, and at last, their light would fall to the earth and take on new life. It was impossible to know whether a soul would end up as a fish in the sea, a plant on the land, or as a human.

Every time a star's twinkle fell on the ground, a new life was created.

As a result, starlight was something people revered and felt fondly toward—but they feared it too.

"We let the wind brought over from the distant sea sound our flower whistles. We remember those we have lost under the starlight. If you want to mourn her peacefully, then put her at ease."

Shiki bit his lip and lowered his head. Then, he slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry. I...don't think I'm capable of sending her to paradise at this stage."

Juetsu frowned slightly. She looked over at Koshun to find that he was staring out of the lattice window.

The rain had finally stopped, and through the window, beads of water were falling from leaves, one drop at a time.

Once Koshun got back to the inner palace, Eisei made him some tea. Steam rose from the kettle and the smell of tea filled the room. Koshun felt like the tension in his shoulders and back was slowly

releasing. He closed his eyes and reclined in his seat.

Eisei scooped up the boiled tea with a ladle and poured it into a cup. Koshun took it from him. The smell of tea that wafted from the cup was even stronger than from the pot—refreshing and aromatic.

Koshun took a sip. The drink had a subtle sweetness to it.

“Where is this tea from?” he asked.

“Bu Province, master.”

“Is it? It’s good. I always said you make the best tea.”

“Thank you very much,” Eisei replied, a slightly proud-looking smile appearing on his face.

As Koshun was drinking his tea, he posed Eisei a question. “Has anybody managed to track down Ho Ichigyo?”

“As expected, he doesn’t appear to have left the imperial capital. The search is ongoing,” Eisei replied.

Koshun nodded. Ho Ichigyo had been identified as the man who brought Shogetsu to the imperial capital and introduced him to Gyoei. Long ago, he had worked as a shaman for the previous dynasty and had even been Ran Hyogetsu’s mentor. What were his intentions in sending Shogetsu into the inner palace? There were many questions he needed to be answered, so capturing him was an urgent necessity.

Then, Koshun threw yet another question Eisei’s way. “Sei, what do you think about Shiki?”

Unrelated questions were a common feature of Eisei and Koshun’s conversations. These few words were enough for the emperor’s eunuch to know exactly what he was being asked.

Eisei lowered his glossy long eyelashes and answered him right away. “I think he’s dangerous.”

“Do you?”

“Master... I don’t think you should place too much trust in him,” he warned.

“Does it look like I trust him?”

Eisei clammed up and tried to read Koshun’s expression. Koshun traced the rim of his teacup with a fingertip. The cup had birds and flowers painted on it.

“...I’m just curious about what Choyo is thinking,” the emperor said, elaborating.

“Saname Choyo...?”

“I’ve met him perhaps three times, but his intentions were impossible to read. If the Saname clan has gotten involved with the Eight True Teachings and *are* planning something untoward, they won’t do anything to arouse suspicion—not under any circumstances. They wouldn’t miss out on murdering Shiki *and* let him get away. If Shiki was able to escape Ga Province, then that was because Choyo intended it to happen.”

“...Are you saying that Shiki is acting as one of their agents?”

“No,” said Koshun, putting his cup of tea down on the table. “It’s difficult to guess the truth, though. Perhaps they simply let him get away, or perhaps they were the ones who sent him here. Maybe Choyo and Shiki are linked, or maybe they’re not. And then there’s the question of what kind of connection there is between Choyo and the Eight True Teachings...”

We cannot rush this, Koshun thought. *If we do, we’ll let him slip away.*

Koshun crossed his arms in front of him and closed his eyes slightly.

Saname Choyo... The head of the Saname clan, a man whose real name remained unknown. What could he be up to?

“I’m also concerned by that silk merchant from Ga Province, the one who has been visiting the Un family for some time now,” said Eisei.

Koshun gave him a slight nod.

Don’t do anything stupid, Grand Master Un.

He was slipping through his fingers. In the end, there would be nothing left. The emperor couldn’t get that thought out of his head.

While Koshun sat there with his eyes closed, Eisei started burning some incense. Clove, saussurea root, aromatic logs... All of these different kinds of incense had been in the inner court for a long time, but recently, he liked to burn fragrant wood aroma. This was the type of incense that Jusetsu often used as well.

The soft fragrance filled the space around him. This scent made

Koshun feel like he was back inside the Yamei Palace. He took a deep breath in, then let one out again.

Jusetsu had told him that the god that believers of the Eight True Teachings worshipped was the ancient great sea turtle god. It felt like something was squirming around and reaching out to him—and he wanted to find out exactly that thing was.

“What’s wrong?”

Noticing the sound of footsteps, Koshun opened his eyes. A servant eunuch was standing there hold a tray. Eisei took the tray from him and placed it on the table.

“This gift arrived from Gei Province yesterday.”

“Oh... A rare large sea snail, wasn’t it?”

Eisei lifted the cloth up off the tray. On top of it sat the shell of a large snail, almost as large as Koshun’s head. It was a deep, dark black color, but it glistened with all the colors of the rainbow depending on which angle you looked at it from. It was called a lustrous raven shell. It was thought that a large sea snail was the messenger of the god who created the mist at the end of the sea—also known as the sea edge mirage. Not only that, but this was a rarer type of raven shell that had an iridescent shine to it. As a result, it had been gifted to the emperor as a good omen. Apparently, a local fisherman had picked it up after finding it washed up on the beach.

“The beach in Roko? That’s Ishiha’s hometown. I’ve heard that all kinds of things get washed up there.”

Even dead bodies, Koshun thought to himself—although he didn’t say it aloud.

The emperor suddenly remembered the legend that alleged the country had been formed from the chopped-up corpse of a god. People said that it was the corpse of a god that had been washed over from the Secluded Palace.

A country born out of death, thought Koshun. *Does that mean that the emperor who rules over it sits on a throne of bones?*

He picked up the shell and gazed at its iridescence. As he did so, he suddenly felt like he heard a little voice from somewhere. He looked around to see where it was coming from.

“Is something the matter?”

“It’s just... Can’t you hear somebody talking?” the emperor asked.

Eisei stood still, trying as hard as he could to hear it. “...No. I can’t hear anything.”

Koshun waved his hand, urging Eisei—who was frankly confused by the whole ordeal—to be quiet. The voice really *was* there.

But...what was it that he was hearing? It was as quiet as a whisper, but he didn’t have any issues hearing it. It sounded close, but far away at the same time.

“Summer Sovereign.”

Koshun was startled. He had heard this voice before. It was a voice that wasn’t quite high or low, and it had the echo of deep waves. It was...

“Shogetsu... No—the Owl, I mean.”

Koshun looked down at the shell he was holding—and where the voice was coming from. *How is this happening?*

“Summer Sovereign...or should I call you Emperor? You folks’ pseudonyms can get quite complicated,” the voice said.

“What are you talking about? Where is your voice coming from?” Koshun asked.

“Master?” Eisei said, stricken with panic. “What’s going on?”

“...Can’t you hear it?” In a state of astonishment, Koshun looked at Eisei and the shell in turn.

“Only those who have my mark can hear my voice,” the Owl said.

“Your mark?”

“I hurt you. It must have left a mark?”

Koshun grabbed hold of his own arm. The wound that the Owl had given him had long since healed, but a pale mark was left in its place. It was brown and had a pattern resembling that of an owl feather.

“I am no longer able to move at all. I can’t even create another apparatus. All I can do is let you hear me.” The Owl made a sigh-like noise. “I’m in prison, you see. Doing any more is completely beyond me.”

“Prison?”

"I told you that meddling was forbidden, didn't I? Or did I not? I don't remember. Oh well, never mind. Anyway, I was punished and sent to prison. That's why I had this large sea snail be my messenger."

"I thought you said you weren't able to create apparatuses?" Koshun asked.

"This isn't an apparatus. This sea snail is just acting as a messenger and relaying my voice. While you hold that shell in your hand, I'm swaying to and fro in the sea—it's an intermediary through which you can hear me. The only issue is that sometimes my voice gets through and sometimes it doesn't. It just depends on the tide."

Koshun stared at the shell, frowning.

"What in the world could you possibly be doing this for then? You won't be able to kill the Raven Consort using your voice alone."

The Owl's goal was to kill the Raven Consort—and by extension, the Raven.

"No, I won't. However, now that I've gotten involved, I can't bear to just sit back and watch. I want to save the Raven."

The Owl normally spoke in an easygoing, detached tone—but it was only when he expressed that particular desire that he sounded sincere.

"But you can't do anything anymore, can you...?" Koshun said.

"No. That's why I want to ask you for help."

"What?" Koshun was staggered. "You're not actually going to ask me to kill the Raven Consort, are you?"

"No. I want you to save the Raven," the Owl repeated.

"But wouldn't that..."

"You don't want to kill the Raven Consort. I want to save the Raven. It's not as if I have any desire to murder a helpless, innocent young girl either. I told you that before, didn't I? So just think about it."

"Think about what?" Koshun asked.

"Think about how we can save the Raven *without* killing the Raven Consort."

The emperor stared back at the shell. The coal-black shell was captivating, and its iridescent sheen reminiscent of moonlight

oscillating on the surface of a lake.

“That is to say, there has to be a way we can save the Raven Consort too. You want to rescue her, don’t you?”

Koshun gulped slightly at that. The Owl was right. He did want to rescue Jusetsu from her suffering. That was what he wanted.

“But wouldn’t that...”

Wouldn’t that mean losing the Winter Sovereign? he thought.

By locking the Raven away inside the Raven Consort—and by having the Raven Consort hide away in the inner palace—they were just about managing to keep the Winter Sovereign and Summer Sovereign in their positions. If someone were to free the Raven, what would happen then? That Raven probably wasn’t the same Raven as it had originally been. This wasn’t a dynasty where the Winter Sovereign and the Summer Sovereign were equals anymore either.

Chaos was bound to unfold. Chaos led to conflict.

Koshun felt as if he was seeing a vision of the country being torn apart by war. He closed his eyes and drooped his head. There was no way he could make that choice.

Undeterred by Koshun’s silence, the Owl carried on speaking.

“I’m not opposed to your wishes. So, think about it. Think about how we can save them both.”

“But it would be so selfish...” Koshun placed his hand against his forehead. “Are you saying that *I* should find a way to do something that a god can’t?”

He heard the Owl snort. “A god? You humans are free to worship us ‘gods’ all you want, but that concept is alien to me. We may be able to do a few things that you all can’t, but there are some things that *you* are capable of that would be impossible for us. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with respecting those who are of a different kind, but don’t expect us to be able to do *anything*.”

“Well, it’s not that I expect that, but...” *I think saying we’re of ‘different kinds’ is somewhat of an understatement*, Koshun thought to himself.

“Can you hold your own when faced with the claws of a bear? Can you withstand the fangs of a wolf?” asked the Owl. “I think not. But

what you *do* have is wisdom. You can use your wisdom to make tools to fight off those beasts. That's the difference between you and us. Yes, we may be wise as well, but it's likely different from that which you possess. Remember, we never even dreamed that Kosho would do something so stupid—something that didn't benefit anyone. No, it did benefit somebody—but just one person, Ran Yu. The way you people think is beyond us.”

Kosho—the first Raven Consort—the main culprit when it came to locking the Raven away inside the Raven Consort.

“That is the precise reason why I think you humans might be able to come up with ideas that only you could. One of those ideas might be a way to save the Raven...”

Could there be a way to save the Raven? If there was, then...

The Owl's voice became more difficult to hear. “The tide is ebbing,” he said faintly—and with that, the voice was gone.

Silence descended on the room.

Koshun resisted the urge to hurl the shell across the room and instead placed it back on the tray. At last, he let out a deep breath.

Eisei had been patiently waiting this whole time. “...Master. Is everything all right?” he asked, with a sense of trepidation in his voice.

“Yes...” The earlier tension in his body had been eased by the tea Eisei made for him, but now it was coming back with a vengeance. “I apologize for the hassle, but could you prepare some more tea for me? And make it tepid, if possible.”

“Understood.”

Eisei set about getting some tea ready once again. Far from being bothered by the emperor's request, he happily got started on the task—as tedious as it was. He started a fire, boiled some water, and let the tea brew. Koshun felt himself relaxing again as he watched the eunuch go through the steps.

Although the tea leaves had been roasted and ground in advance, it still required a degree of skill to ensure the water was the right temperature so the brewing process would perfectly enhance the tea's flavor.

Eisei had always been good at getting the hang of things, no matter the task. He was clever that way.

If he wasn't a eunuch, he would have made a good official.

This thought occurred to Koshun from time to time, but he never voiced it. It was too late to mention it now, and it would only humiliate him.

“...You were always quick to improve once you were taught something, whether it be tea or writing,” he commented instead.

“Thank you very much,” Eisei replied. “It was all thanks to how much I enjoyed being taught by you.”

“Was it?”

“It was something I never even dreamed of until you saved me, master.”

The sound of boiling water resonated throughout the room. Eisei took some salt from the salt holder and added it to the pot.

“I don't regret becoming a eunuch. I'm sure that if I had stayed where I was born, I would have suffered a worse fate,” Eisei said. It was as if he knew what Koshun was thinking. A smile appeared on his face—a beautiful one.

Koshun said nothing in return. The emperor knew what the beautiful young man had been through since he came to the imperial estate as a neophyte. It was hard to imagine what could possibly be worse than that.

That said, he had heard that Eisei had been born into a brothel. He had never pried into it, and Eisei didn't seem like he wanted to be asked about it.

That was one thing he seemed to have in common with Jusetsu, actually. Koshun had heard a snippet of that story at one point. She'd lived there until she became a house servant, and her mother had been a prostitute.

Koshun stared hard at Eisei's face as he scooped the tea with a ladle. Jusetsu's facial features were different from Eisei's, but they were still beautiful. There was something fundamentally similar about the auras of the two. They were both good-looking people, but at the same time, they had a certain air of brusqueness and indifference about them.

“...I feel like you and Jusetsu could get along well, you know.”

Eisei very nearly spilled his tea. “S-sometimes, when you're being

still and silent, you come out with the most exorbitant statements, master.”

By the look on Eisei’s face, it seemed that he felt that they’d never get along well, not even in a million years.

Koshun found the man’s reaction so funny that he couldn’t stop a laugh from escaping his lips. *I’ll try that line on Jusetu next*, he thought to himself.

It was raining again. The rain was so heavy that it could have almost made holes in the cobblestones. If it was only this intense for a short period, nothing terrible would happen—but if the downpour continued all night, it wouldn’t be surprising if all the palace building’s roof tiles had shattered by the time morning rolled around.

“We can’t go on patrol when it’s like this,” Tankai said exasperatedly as he looked out the window. Even his voice was drowned out by the sound of the rain.

Onkei and Tankai were usually stationed outside, but they were inside with Jiujiu and Ishiha because of the weather. Having two extra people there made the room feel cramped. Kogyo and Keishi were preparing some tea in the kitchen. The smell of it brewing, however, was concealed by the stench of the rain, and there wasn’t even a whiff of the scent in the air. Jusetu looked up from her reading and shifted her gaze toward the window. It looked more like buckets of water were being dumped from the sky rather than regular rainfall. It was too misty to see much of anything.

It was dim inside, so they lit some lanterns. The kind of darkness caused by the rain outside was different from the vague gloom that came at dawn and dusk. There was something else, something mysterious about it.

A Go board was laid out by the window, and Jiujiu and Ishiha were playing a game together. Both of their hands were unsteady as they put down stones. Behind them stood Onkei and Tankai, giving them suggestions about which moves to make—as well as which moves *not* to make. Or rather, only Tankai was making suggestions—Onkei instead watched in silence, occasionally opening his mouth to tell Tankai to be quiet.

The Go board was a present from Koshun. “Use this to practice,”

he'd said. As it turned out, Onkei was an unexpectedly good player, so Jusetu got him to play with her every now and then. Tankai's skill level, on the other hand, was still a mystery. He was moody and lacked the attention span to make it until the end of a game.

Jusetu's eyes scanned across the page she was reading, but she wasn't retaining any of the information. Instead, she found herself trapped inside her head. Perhaps the rain was partially to blame. There was just so much on her mind—the great sea turtle god, the Eight True Teachings, Hakumyoshi, the Crane Consort...and then Shomei's pale hand, pulling on Shiki's sleeve.

Jusetu didn't necessarily want to leave that ghost be herself, but it was Shomei's concern for Shiki that was helping it persist. Despite knowing that, Shiki was unable to let go of his own attachment—attachment to the thought of revenge.

Did Shiki want to kill the founder of the Eight True Teachings? Koshun had felt the same way about the empress dowager. In that case, he would be the one who could understand Shiki's feelings and sympathize with them too. He'd be the last person to tell the man to just forget it.

Shomei, on the other hand, wanted to stop her adoptive brother—but he had no intentions of doing so. For as long as that was the case, there was nothing Jusetu could do—even though Shiki knew it would leave him with a void.

I doubt Koshun will stop him.

As much as Jusetu seemed to know about Koshun, there were some things about him that she would never be able to wrap her head around. The flames of hatred that he harbored was just one of those things. Even now that the empress dowager was dead, those flames continued to smolder inside of him, leaving him empty and frozen to the core.

That was something that Jusetu didn't understand, but Shiki, on the other hand, would surely be able to.

For some strange reason, that fact sent a piercing pain through Jusetu's heart. It wasn't anger or frustration, but instead was a feeling of impatience—mixed with the slightest hint of loneliness.

Just what is this feeling? she thought. *And why am I feeling it?*

Jusetsu stood up. Jiujiu and the others paused their conversation, stopped what they were doing, and stood up in response. Jusetsu used her hand to urge them to stand back and headed toward the palace entrance.

“It’s stopped raining,” she said.

Before anyone had realized it, the misty, heavy rain shower had stopped. The only trace of it left was the water dripping from the green leaves outside, visible through the lattice window.

“Where are you going, niangniang?” Jiujiu asked.

“I want to go to the Koto Institute.”

“Then let us send a messenger to notify them of your imminent visit.”

Onkei looked at Tankai.

“What, me? Not Ishiha?” the eunuch replied.

“Ishiha will be too slow,” Onkei responded, pointing toward the doorway. “Hurry up and go.”

“Why are *you* giving me orders?” Tankai grumbled. He obligingly ran outside anyway. He was unsurprisingly light on his feet.

“Tankai is a fast runner, so if you start walking now, the timing will work out perfectly. I shall accompany you. Go ahead.”

“But niangniang, what about the tea?” Jiujiu asked. “You can’t leave right after they made the effort to brew it for you.”

Jiujiu looked back toward the kitchen. Now that it had stopped raining, she could tell that there was the scent of brewed tea was in the air.

“You can all drink it for me.”

“But we’ve got those baozi with lotus seed paste inside. The ones Hua niangniang gave you today.”

Jusetsu was walking over to the entrance but stopped in her tracks. “...Make sure you leave me some of those,” she said, before adding, “and save some for Onkei and Tankai too.”

Jusetsu crossed paths with Tankai, who was on his way back, at the gate to the Koto Institute premises.

"I told them that the Raven Consort was on her way," Tankai stated casually. "Should I accompany you as well?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Go back to the Yamei Palace," she said.

"I *am* technically your bodyguard, though."

"Onkei is all the protection I need on this occasion."

"But that makes me—the 'unnecessary' one—feel sad." Tankai laughed. "Kidding, kidding."

"You feel sad?" Jusetu looked up at Tankai.

"Hm?"

"In that case, come along."

Jusetu left it that and went through the gate. Tankai looked taken aback.

"Niangniang is a kind person," Onkei said to him. "Don't joke around."

Tankai said nothing and followed behind them.

A scholar was waiting in front of the Koto Institute's palace building and he gave Jusetu a slight bow. It was Ka Meiin, about forty years old and looking intelligent as always. Jusetu had once said he looked like he had a whole library's worth of knowledge stuffed inside his brain—and he really did.

"Is Reiko Shiki here?"

Meiin wasn't bothered by Jusetu's lack of preamble and didn't even raise an eyebrow. "Yes, he is. I'll take you to him."

As Jusetu walked down the passage, the sight of a black-robed consort made scholars stare at her. The men's eyes practically bulged out of their sockets. She'd received a permit to go in and out of the inner palace from Koshun so it was now easy for her to come and go, but it was still less troublesome to go out dressed as a eunuch than in her usual Raven Consort attire.

Meiin opened the door to one of the rooms. Inside, there were rows of shelves filled with all kinds of reading material, from rolls of writing strips made of bamboo, to paper scrolls, and to bound books. In front of the shelves stood a young man with his back to the door, holding a roll of bamboo writing strips. He turned around—it was Shiki.

“...Raven Consort,” he said. Flustered, the man gently put the roll back on the shelf and bowed in front of her.

“There’s one little thing I’d like to discuss with you,” she said.

“Oh...”

Jusetsu and Shiki faced each other across the table. Meiin gave them a small bow—but as he went to leave the room, he appeared to remember something and turned around.

“Oh yes,” he said in a fluid tone of voice. “His Majesty will be arriving imminently. I have just sent him a messenger to inform him about the Raven Consort’s visit. I’m afraid food and drink is strictly forbidden in here so we can’t serve you any tea—hopefully that isn’t too much of an inconvenience for you.”

After that, Meiin really did leave the room at last.

Koshun’s coming?

This wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but there was still a very small part of Jusetsu that didn’t want to get Koshun mixed up in her conversation with Shiki.

Onkei stood behind Jusetsu while Tankai stood next to the doorway. Jusetsu leaned back in her chair and stared at Shiki—and the pale hand pulling at his sleeve. The faint sunlight shining in through the lattice window gave one side of him a subtle glow, along with those pale fingers, holding onto his sleeve with an anxious yet firm grip. With the faint sunlight making them stand out more, they looked thin and helpless.

“Do you...want to kill the founder of the Eight True Teachings?”

Shiki looked down before he answered, a veil of despair descending over his face.

“I’m...not sure. Sometimes, the idea of choking him to death does appeal to me. By having the audacity to allude to the fact that this religion is the successor to the True Teachings of the Moon, he managed to attract its former believers. And yet since the religion is allegedly under the Saname clan’s protection, both the province council and the envoy institute are just idly standing by, watching. Either that, or they’ve been won over as well... I have to *destroy* the Eight True Teachings—to prevent what happened to Shomei from happening to somebody else. But...although that might be my respectable reason, I

have another, stronger motivation for wishing for the religion's destruction. Most of all, I just want to want to beat that man to the ground. To kill him in a pool of blood and humiliation."

Shiki's voice was deep and quiet. His tone was so gentle that it didn't seem to have any particular intensity to it, but Jusetsu could still hear the insipid rage that had settled deep inside of him.

"This isn't just hatred," he added. "I have regrets too, which must make me hate him even more."

"Regrets? Over not being able to save Shomei?"

Shiki closed his eyes tight and bowed his head.

"Shi..."

Just as Jusetsu was calling out his name, the door opened. Tankai had been standing next to it but hurriedly got down on his knees—as did Onkei. Shiki also fell to his knees and gave the new visitor a bow. The only person left seated was Jusetsu.

It was Koshun, with Eisei behind him. Koshun urged Tankai and the others to get back up and came over to the table.

"Is it all right if I join this conversation?" he asked Jusetsu.

It was typical of Koshun to ask such a thing. It didn't matter whether he was allowed to join a conversation or not—he was the emperor. It wasn't like there was anyone who had the authority to stop him.

"Do what you please," Jusetsu replied.

Koshun sat down in the chair next to Jusetsu. Shiki looked at Koshun and Jusetsu in turn, a hint of bewilderment in his eyes.

"Carry on," Jusetsu said to Shiki. "What is it that you regret?"

Shiki looked down and stared at his hands for a few moments. Then, he looked back up again. "I suppose there's a difference between being siblings and being *virtually* siblings."

Jusetsu blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I thought of Shomei as my little sister, so I was pleased when the Reiko family took her in as well. I thought Shomei was happy about it too. I believed that she loved me as a brother—I never doubted it." He paused, and a self-deprecating smile came to his face. "No, that's not right. That was just what I *wanted* to believe. I turned a blind eye to the

truth. For some reason, I always had an inkling, but I pretended not to notice it.”

“Does that mean...” Jusetsu began, but she bit her tongue. She didn’t know whether saying something so explicitly was appropriate.

“The night it was decided that she was getting married, Shomei opened up to me. She told me she had romantic feelings for me, rather than brotherly ones. I...couldn’t reciprocate. Shomei seemed like she knew what I was going to say. She didn’t show any reluctance about getting married, and the next day, the wedding went ahead as if nothing happened. But...” Shiki buried his head in his hands. “Maybe it would have been for the best if I *did* feel the same way. If I stopped her from getting married, she wouldn’t have died. But...that would have been a lie.”

Shiki groaned. It was as if he was spitting out the dregs of regret that had piled up in the deep recesses of his heart.

“Shomei is my little sister. That’s what she is to me. There was no way I could have ever seen her in that way.”

Shiki had probably been stuck in a constant state of agony all this time. If he had reciprocated Shomei’s feelings, she may not have died—but Shiki wasn’t able to love her as anything but a sister.

Jusetsu remembered the late Magpie Consort. In her case, she had fallen in love with her blood-related older brother. This, on the other hand, was the story of an older brother who wasn’t able to give his little sister the romantic love she wanted, despite them not being blood-related.

These things were just beyond anyone’s control.

Should Shiki have pretended that he reciprocated her feelings? Of course not—but he still couldn’t escape from the regret he felt.

Jusetsu had a good understanding of what that was like. “That regret... Is that the reason you can’t let go of this hatred?” she asked.

Shiki loosely shook his head. “I’m not sure. It’s not as if I hate him because I can’t escape it—but when I think about the hatred I feel, the regret is always looming in the background.”

Jusetsu stared at the pale hand pulling at Shiki’s sleeve. It was discreetly holding onto it, unmoving.

“Even if you didn’t feel regret anymore, it’s not as if your hatred

would just disappear,” Koshun said softly. His face was turned toward the lattice window. A subtle stream of sunlight was shining through it. “Likewise, your hatred won’t go away if its target isn’t around anymore.”

His voice sounded sad and hoarse, like a breeze blowing through barren trees in winter.

“The buried embers carry on, burning inside your empty heart forever,” he concluded.

Would those embers eventually burn Koshun to ashes too? Jutsu trembled slightly as that fear gripped her.

“Buried embers... I see. I have a blaze inside of me as well. It’s inside, so it doesn’t matter whether the person you hate dies or not. No external factors can put those flames out.” Shiki brought his left hand over to his right sleeve—the sleeve that the ghost was pulling on. “I’m sorry, Shomei. I can’t rid you of your worries. So...let’s be together—until you feel better.”

He placed his hand on top of hers in the weak sunlight.

Shiki bowed his head at Jutsu in apology. “I’m sorry to have wasted your time after you went through the effort of listening to my story.”

“It’s all right...” Jutsu said, averting her gaze.

Koshun silently rose to his feet. The only thing Jutsu could hear was the rustling of his robe as he moved.

“Shiki. I want to hear a little about the Eight True Teachings,” he stated, then headed over to the doorway.

“Understood,” replied Shiki. He stood up and followed the emperor.

Jutsu stayed seated as she watched them leave. *What is this feeling?*

There was something smoldering away inside her chest. It was like a coiled snake slithering around, churning up all the dirt that had been sitting at the bottom of a pit.

There was something that pair knew—or rather, that *Shiki* knew—that Jutsu couldn’t wrap her head around. And the truth was, she probably never would.

“Niangniang,” Onkei called out to her. “Shall we go back?”

“Umm... Yes.” Jusetsu nodded and rose from her seat.

As she left the room, Tankai, who’d been waiting back by the doorway, gently asked her a question.

“Are you all right?”

Jusetsu looked up at him. He didn’t have his usual carefree express on his face. Instead, he looked serious.

“I’m perfectly fine,” she replied, and then left the room.

What could have possibly made him ask that? And why did I tell him I was fine? Not even Jusetsu knew the answer to either of these questions.

The Yamei Palace was surrounded by a grove of bay trees and rhododendrons. During the rainy reason, the trees would practically sing for joy, exuding a breath of fresh air as their leaves turned a deeper shade of green.

Tankai’s footsteps didn’t make a sound as he headed toward the Yamei Palace beneath the dense foliage. A star raven cawed noisily as it flew over the top of his head.

Sensing something moving in the wind, Tankai stopped. A naked blade was thrust out in front of him. He glanced at it—a blade partially hidden by the leafy shadows cast over it—and shifted his gaze to the left.

Onkei was lurking beneath the trees, holding a dirk.

“You’ve gotten very vicious all of a sudden, haven’t you?” Tankai said.

“Who have you been meeting up with?” Onkei asked. He had a fierce look in his eyes, and it didn’t seem like he was going to put his weapon away.

“Why do you have to put it like that? It was just one of the court ladies from another palace. I got us some information. You know I’m no stranger to a good scoop.”

“That particular court lady is acting as Chief Secretariat Un’s ‘ears.’”

Tankai’s lips twisted into a smile. “Watching, were you? Well, I

can't say I'm surprised."

"Are you acting as his ears, too?"

"No. I *could* assure you I'm not a spy of any sort...but would you even believe me?"

Onkei took a step forward, and his dirk gleamed in the light. Tankai swiftly dodged, grabbed Onkei by the wrists, and tripped him. After Onkei tumbled to the ground, he took the weapon from his hand and pinned him down. Tankai thrust the dirk toward his throat.

Onkei looked at Tankai, a look of disbelief in his eyes.

"I might have said that using a bow and arrow was my strong point, but I don't remember saying that I was poor at martial arts," remarked Tankai.

Onkei scrunched up his face in frustration. "You...always deceive people like that. That's why I'll never trust you."

"Not revealing your skills is necessary to survive. Still, it's the truth that I'm not a spy. If I were, I'd be a lot better at it. For one, I wouldn't let you catch me."

Onkei was still glowering at Tankai suspiciously. The other man rummaged through Onkei's breast pocket and pulled out the dirk's sheath. He put the blade back inside, gave it back to Onkei, then lifted himself off the other eunuch.

"I met with that court lady to gather intel on Chief Secretariat Un," Tankai explained. "Bet you want to hear it, don't you?"

"...What did you offer her in exchange?"

"Chief Secretariat Un wants to know about the Raven Consort, so I just told her random stuff."

"Like what?" Onkei asked.

"That the Mandarin Duck Consort likes her, and that she showed her a picture scroll just the other day. Simple things like that. He'll feel better knowing that the Raven Consort gets along with his granddaughter, rather than being at odds."

Onkei stared intently at Tankai's face. "You did this...for niangniang's benefit?"

"I *am* her bodyguard. I wouldn't do anything that wasn't going to help her."

Onkei looked at Tankai questioningly for a little while, then finally let out a small sigh. "I see. That's good to hear, then."

"Didn't you get scolded by Attendant Ei for forgetting whose eunuch you really were?"

"I might be under our master's employ, but for the time being, I'm niangniang's bodyguard."

"Hmph." Tankai laughed at that. "Attendant Ei must be furious at that. That's why he sent me to work with you. Still...I do understand."

Tankai looked toward the Yamei Palace. Its black tiles were peeking out from above the trees.

"You're right—niangniang is kind. It's no wonder you've been mesmerized by her." He then lowered his voice to a whisper. "I am no exception. She's kind, defenseless, and there's something delicate about her too. You know what I mean, don't you?"

Onkei silently listened to Tankai speak.

"Nobody would ever treat a bunch of guys like us like they would anybody else, regardless of whether we were eunuchs or not. I'm right, aren't I? I'm a failed thief who got arrested for making a silly screw-up. I was bought by a broker and dumped here because I had the looks for it. I'm a scumbag. But to niangniang, I don't think it would have mattered if I was a thief, a eunuch, or a prince—she would treat me with the same level of consideration, regardless." Tankai gazed idly at the coal-black tiles. "I might be a worthless loser, but I still want to see niangniang happy."

Onkei gazed at the Yamei Palace too. "...I agree."

Tankai continued. "I'm not as devoted as you are, though. I just want her to like me."

Onkei frowned. "What?"

"You're happy as long as you can do everything you can for her, but it's different for me. I want to win her favor."

Appearing to not understand, Onkei simply gave Tankai a scornful look and made no comment on the topic.

"...So?" Onkei asked as they began walking toward the Yamei Palace. "Were you able to elicit any information regarding Chief Secretariat Un from that court lady?"

"I was. But it's something we need to inform our master about, rather than niangniang."

"Did something happen?"

"There's something that's *gonna* happen. Don't ask me what it is, though." Tankai lowered his voice. "Chief Secretariat Un is gathering intel about Ga Province. He has his 'ears' digging around the Hakkaku Palace and is making them investigate everything, from the Crane Consort and her father Choyo to the shopkeepers and traveling traders who come and go. I don't really know why, but maybe our master might have an idea. He's not just trying to find out how things are going with the consorts like he was before. It's something more worrisome—and it smells fishy."

Onkei stroked his chin thoughtfully. "The Hakkaku Palace...? Hmm."

"Opinions on her are very mixed. Some people say she's a generous person, and some say there's something off about her."

"Something...off?"

"Like, you can't tell what's going on in her head," Tankai explained.

An uncomfortably warm breeze, damp and heavy, blew through the grove.

Tankai looked up at the sky. It was entirely covered by light gray clouds—the same color as the robes that eunuchs wore.

"We'd better get inside before it starts raining," Tankai said to hurry Onkei along, before breaking out into a run himself.

Even before the sun had set, the main street of the prostitution quarter was illuminated with bright lights. Behind the paper lanterns hanging at the gates, the workers—their faces coated in thick white makeup—idly plucked away at the strings of their lutes. In the winter, business would have already wrapped up by now, but at this time of year, the days were long. Also, it looked as if it was going to start pouring down at any minute, which would also cause foot traffic to decline. Few customers were walking by, and the brothels looked unoccupied.

Eisei wore an overcoat to shield him from the rain. He kept his

mouth tucked beneath his collar as he sauntered along.

Never in a million years did I think I'd set foot in here again, he thought to himself.

Scowling, he kept his head down as he walked. There was a chance he could run into somebody he knew here, because after all, this was where Eisei was born and raised.

He lived in a house where the stench of white powder and sweat filled the air. His mother was the most beautiful woman in the brothel, and his father was one of her most regular customers. He even talked about buying her freedom and making her his mistress...but nothing ever came of it. Instead, Eisei's mother died with a razor blade to her throat.

The smells of white powder, sweat, and coughed-up blood—those were Eisei's childhood memories.

Left all alone, Eisei had no choice but to go to work himself. Female prostitutes were called bustards, named similarly to performers. Male prostitutes were called ducks. Particularly young male prostitutes were called neophytes. Eisei refused to take this path and chose to become a eunuch instead, and he was shocked when he found out that new eunuchs were called neophytes as well. His shifu made it clear to him that they were effectively the same thing. Eisei was beautiful—and easy prey.

Unable to withstand the torment and humiliation his shifu and other superiors put him through any longer, Eisei ran away. He leaped into a garden without knowing where he was headed, and there, he met Koshun.

He couldn't remember where it was for certain, but it was probably the Hakkaku Palace's garden. That was the palace where Koshun's mother used to live. Eisei was virtually naked and covered in wounds from head to toe when he ran away, but Koshun still took him under his wing. The man made him his personal attendant, no questions asked. To this day, Koshun had never asked Eisei a single thing about what he was going through at that time.

Koshun was the one who named him. Both parts of his name had been bestowed on him by the now-emperor. The eunuch gave up the name he'd gone by until that point, and he was never going to use it again.

For Eisei, Koshun was his one and only master, and he saw the emperor's life as even more important than his own. As a result, he feared Juseitsu and the way she could possibly threaten his master's position. She infuriated him.

Recently, however, Eisei had found out there was another reason he had to despise Juseitsu—she was Koshun's friend.

That kind of relationship was something that would always be out of reach for Eisei. He was Koshun's servant, and he had chosen to become as such. Eisei saw Koshun as his savior, the person who gifted him his name. To the eunuch, he'd always been a subject of worship. It was outrageous to think of him as an equal.

And then, there was Shiki as well.

Ever since Shiki had come into the picture, Eisei had been left feeling perturbed. Whenever he spoke to the scholar, Koshun appeared relaxed. It was probably because Shiki didn't treat him in such a stuffy, formal manner. He wasn't as deferential as the officials in the imperial estate, which was perhaps due to the amount of time Shiki spent in the provinces. Eisei suspected that it was this lack of formality that made Koshun feel more at ease around him.

That was something else that Eisei could never replicate. Since coming to that realization, he noticed that when it came to Juseitsu, he felt something akin to jealousy.

Eisei was Koshun's most faithful servant. He couldn't be his *friend*. It was impossible.

He didn't regret becoming Koshun's personal attendant in the slightest. It was just that a smidgen of bitter sadness had managed to seep its way into his heart, and that was all there was to it.

Eisei held onto the collar of his overcoat and hurried ahead. He left the main street and turned down a narrow alleyway. He was heading for the street behind the brothels.

"We can get someone else to go on your behalf," Koshun had suggested, worry in his voice. Eisei, however, had insisted that there was no problem and left the imperial estate.

The small brothel stood on the corner of the street. It was old and sooty but didn't feel grimy. The fronts of the houses and the gates were all kept clean, but the same couldn't be said about the streets behind

them. The doors were open, but all was quiet—a hint that no guests had arrived yet. He circled around from the front—where the paper lanterns were hanging—and went to the back. There, he looked in through the doorway. It was dim inside, and the doorway led immediately into the kitchen. A young girl was sitting down in front of the stove, lighting a fire.

“Good evening,” Eisei called out to her.

The young girl turned around, looking surprised. When she looked up at Eisei’s face, her eyes widened even more. She seemed to be only about fifteen or sixteen.

“I heard that there was a scribe here. Could you fetch him for me?” Eisei had to repeat the same line twice before anything registered on the young girl’s dazed-looking face.

Eventually, the girl spoke up. “O-oh right, that old scribe man, right? Yeah. Hold on a minute. Just a second. He’s at the back. I’ll get him for you right now, okay?”

She sprang to her feet and retreated into the back. Koshun followed after her. It was such a small brothel that the “back” was really just a few paces away.

“Mr. Ho? You have a customer,” the girl called lethargically as she opened the door.

The small room had a desk and a bed squashed inside. There was one lattice window at the back of it, through which the daylight shined through and faintly brightened up the inside of the room. A thin, frail old man sat in front of the desk. He seemed healthy enough, but he wasn’t exactly brimming with vitality either. He looked rather miserable.

Eisei silently pushed the young girl aside and entered the room. He stood in front of the old man. The old man jerked his head back in shock and looked up at Eisei with fear in his eyes.

This was the man people had been searching for quite some time.

“Well, well, I can’t say I’m not surprised. I thought you would have used an alias at least...Ho Ichigyo.”

The old man—Ho Ichigyo—went to get to his feet, but Eisei pinned him in the chair by his shoulders.

“Don’t try any strange tricks. It’ll only worsen your sentence,” he

threatened him.

Ho groaned and sat back down with a frown. It seemed like he had bad knees, anyway.

The young girl stood in the doorway, flustered and unsure what to do.

Eisei turned around. "This man's an old friend of mine. Give us some alone time," he said.

The girl looked hesitant, but nodded and walked away. She left the door open, perhaps worried that Ho would end up in danger if it was closed. She was more sensible than the eunuch initially thought.

Eisei looked down at Ho. He was a frail-looking old man. His face was pale, and he was trembling slightly. It came as quite a shock that a man as feeble as him was responsible for sending Shogetsu into the inner palace.

"We've done a background check on you, Ho Ichigyo. You worked as the emperor's shaman in the previous dynasty and acted as Ran Hyogetsu's mentor. Isn't that right?"

Eisei expected Ho to come back with some kind of evasive answer, but Ho just nodded dejectedly. Eisei frowned.

"Didn't you want to run away from the imperial capital? You must have known we'd find you sooner or later, no matter how out-of-the-way the brothel you took refuge in was."

Ho hung his head in defeat. "...I don't have enough energy to go on the run these days," he said. His hoarse voice sounded more like a groan.

"Then you should have just let us arrest you." Eisei snorted. "Were you scared for your life?"

Ho shrunk back at that.

Eisei scowled. "...I despise men like you. You've been sneaking around, hiding away, and feigning ignorance. Gyoei is dead."

Ho looked up, startled. His face was the picture of shock.

"He wasn't executed. He killed himself. He took responsibility for sending Shogetsu into the inner palace. A fine man."

Unlike you, Eisei implied.

Pale-faced, Ho drooped his head down again. “Argh... I’m so sorry...Gyoei.” He covered his face with his hands and burst into tears.

Eisei grimaced at the sight.

“I... I had no idea. I didn’t know that Shogetsu wanted to kill the Raven Consort. If I did, I never would have brought him to the imperial capital. I was planning on never setting foot in there again...”

“Never? Why not?”

“I-I fled the imperial capital when the Ran dynasty fell. I couldn’t bring myself to come face-to-face with their family shrine...”

“Oh,” Eisei simply said.

He understood now. In the time of the previous dynasty, shamans had been appointed to positions of trust, but when Koshun’s grandfather came to the throne, they were all executed or banished.

“You ran away, leaving Ran Hyogetsu to die. How utterly heartless,” Eisei spat.

Ho was sniffing away, his face covered in tears and snot. Eisei couldn’t understand why this man, of all people, had been the emperor’s shaman and Hyogetsu’s mentor. Was he *really* that gifted?

Eisei let out an exasperated sigh. “Personally, I’d prefer if we executed you right away, but my master wishes to speak to you. You’re going to come to the imperial capital.”

Ho looked up, taken aback. “He wants to speak to *me*? About what?”

“He wants you to tell him what you know—about shamans, the previous dynasty, and the role that shamans played...”

Ho blinked. Snot ran down from the old man’s nose.

Eisei scrunched his face, ripped a handkerchief out of his breast pocket, and tossed it onto Ho’s knees. “You look disgraceful. Wipe your face.”

Ho did as Eisei told him and blew his nose. He wiped his face a few times and looked up. “Wh-what does he want to know about shamans?”

Ho paused and then continued. “Shamans are sorcerers who use magic that has been passed down since time immemorial. That sets them apart from both oracles and priests. Their origin dates back to

ancient times, when they learned their skills from a god. Nowadays, they're treated no differently than roadside fortune tellers, but in the past, they worked for rulers. They propped up and protected dynasties."

The old man spoke with effortless eloquence. His speech was brimming with confidence, which made it hard to believe that he'd been so downhearted just moments earlier. This showing gave Eisei a glimpse of how dignified he'd once been while working as the emperor's shaman.

I can now imagine what he would have been like then, thought Eisei.

"The god that taught the shamans their skills was the ao god. The ao god was created from the chopped-up corpse of the great sea turtle god, which was worshipped by the Hi dynasty, and..."

"Wait," Eisei said, interrupting Ho's flowing explanation. "Tell that to the emperor. I'll take you to the imperial estate right away."

He urged Ho to stand up. Once he stopped speaking, he went back to looking like a miserable old man. He stumbled to his feet.

As Eisei headed to the door with Ho's arm in his, the young girl—who'd been in the kitchen—worriedly peered inside the room. A middle-aged woman, likely the madam of the brothel, stood next to her. Although her skin was saggy, it still appeared to have some sort of glow to it. She probably started off as a prostitute herself. Her puffy eyes watched Eisei.

"Don't be too cruel to that old man. Poor thing." The madam's voice was hoarse for her age. Either she'd drunk too much or sang too much—Eisei couldn't tell which.

"If this brothel gave him shelter knowing he was a criminal, then you won't be getting off scot-free, either," Eisei warned her sternly.

Ho shook his head. "No, I assure you, these people didn't know..."

"I don't know what he's done, but all the guys around here have *some* kind of shady past—we don't bother digging into every little thing that they might've done. After all, it was useful to have a scribe around," said the madam. She gave Eisei a contemptuous look.

Feeling scrutinized, Eisei glared back at her. The woman then cocked her head, causing her loosely tied updo to swing to the side.

"Are you...Jakuji?"

Eisei turned white as a sheet.

“You *are*, aren’t you? I’d recognize that strong-willed, cold disposition of yours anywhere—not to mention your astonishingly beautiful face. You’re the spitting image of your mother, you know,” the woman said. “Gosh, how many years has it been since she died now...? Do you remember me? I worked in the same brothel as your mother. I wasn’t exactly the golden girl, but I still had my fair share of customers. What happened to your mother though, that was *such* a shame. Who would have thought a woman as popular as she was would pin all her hopes on such a dull man, and then get tossed aside?” The madam rattled on. “He was a real scumbag, getting her knocked up only to move on to some other girl.”

Eisei calmed his breathing down, then hurriedly tried to take his leave.

The woman continued anyway. “Did you know about that woman he moved on to? Her name was Ogyoku. She was beheaded. I don’t know what she did wrong, but the troops from the southern defense army arrested her. One lone prostitute up against *soldiers*—can you imagine? It was so frightening. The brothel she worked for was destroyed too...”

Eisei stopped in his tracks and looked down at the madam.

She backed away, recoiling slightly. “Wh-what’s wrong?” she asked.

“That prostitute, Ogyoku... Did she have any children?”

“Huh? I don’t think so. No, actually, there *were* rumors about her having a kid. We’re no strangers to those sorts of rumors, though.”

Eisei said nothing in return.

“Still, there was talk of him buying *her* freedom too. He gave the same false hopes to your mother as well. ‘If you have my child, I’ll buy you out,’ he’d say. Well, I suppose he might’ve had a kid with her then. What a wretch, getting prostitutes pregnant all over the place... And do you know happened to him? He died after being stabbed by a different prostitute. A fitting end, don’t you think?” The madam let out a gravelly chuckle.

Eisei left the room in silence, practically carrying Ho. He spotted a few of the brothel’s workers watching anxiously from the shadows of

the staircase. He returned to the back entrance and left through the kitchen. He brought Ho over to the hitching post at the corner of the prostitution district. He had traveled there by horse-drawn carriage—it would have been difficult for Ho to walk all the way to the imperial estate, with his legs being as bad as they were.

Eisei tied Ho's hands together and loaded him onto the carriage. It started to rain as they rode down the main road leading to the entrance of the imperial estate. As the heavy raindrops beat deafeningly against the hood of the carriage, Eisei stayed silent, not saying a word. It was as if he'd forgotten that Ho was even there.

Upon reaching the palace, Eisei locked Ho in a room in the inner palace's staffing department. The room had previously been used as a storeroom, so he had cleaned it and brought in the bare minimum furnishings that Ho would need.

"Your execution is on hold for the time being, since you're a source of information. However, if you escape, you will be executed immediately."

After making this threat, Eisei left the palace staffing department behind him. The rain shower had eased, to some extent. He pulled his overcoat over his head and headed through the inner palace to the inner court. Raindrops dripped off his coat and onto his face, getting it wet. It was gloomy out, although it wasn't clear whether this was because the sun had set or due to the rain.

Why did my legs take me here?

Before Eisei knew it, he found himself stepping between bay trees and rhododendrons. It was the grove surrounding the Yamei Palace. Rain beat against the trees, its *pit-a-pat* sounding like a terrible drum performance.

Eisei leaned against a bay tree and gazed at the palace's coal-black roof. As heavy as the rain was, he felt like he could still smell the white powder from the prostitution district. It repulsed him. He was lucky that there hadn't been many customers coming and going today. The smell of the people who came to buy women—or young boys—was even more nauseating than that of the makeup.

He'd thought that becoming a eunuch would allow him to live a life in which sex played no role, but eunuchs turned out to be even

worse. Why were they so tenacious in pursuing their carnal desires after they had disposed of their sexuality? The first night after Eisei met his shifu, he was driven to despair.

The feel of his shifu's sweaty, soft hands and his slimy tongue crawling over his body suddenly came flooding back to him. Eisei couldn't stop himself from throwing up. It had been over a decade now, but the memory would never leave him.

Eisei's soul had died that night, and it was only when he met Koshun that he came back to life.

Leaning against the tree again, Eisei took a few shallow breaths. After several moments, he began to calm down.

It was at that point that he heard footsteps approaching. Startled, he looked up.

"...Eisei?"

Jusetsu stood before him, holding a candlestick. The rain had stopped, and a sticky humidity hung in the dark night air. In spite of this, Eisei's body was ice-cold, right to the very tips of his fingers.

"Onkei was worried about you, so he came by and told me you were here. I thought I'd come and check on you."

A shadow stirred near Jusetsu—likely Onkei. Of course he'd find it strange that Eisei was standing idly in one spot, throwing up.

Eisei couldn't help but wish Onkei had just approached by himself.

Perhaps I didn't look very approachable.

Had he really been that shaken up? It wasn't because his memories of being a neophyte had come back to him. Eisei wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked down at Jusetsu, her white face illuminated by the candlestick light. She didn't resemble Eisei in the slightest.

We must both look like our mothers, he thought to himself...before vehemently denying his suspicions. There was no way his fear could be true. How was a prostitute meant to know who fathered her child? He didn't even know if the woman who gave birth to Jusetsu was Ogyoku in the first place.

"Raven Consort... Do you remember what your mother was

called? Not her real name—the name she used for work.”

Jusetsu gave Eisei a skeptical frown but answered anyway. “I think she was called Ogyoku. That’s the only name I knew.”

“...What about your father?”

“I have no idea who he might have been.”

Eisei closed his eyes and exhaled at her answer.

“What is it? Why do you ask?”

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing,” he said. “I just came the wrong way because of the rain. You’ll have to excuse me.”

Eisei then turned back the way he came, but Jusetsu called out to him in an effort to stop him.

“Wait. Take this,” she said, holding out a handkerchief. “Dry your face.”

Eisei remembered how he offered Ho his own handkerchief. Suddenly, he began to cry. Before he knew it, tears seemed to be rolling down his cheeks. Eisei pulled his overcoat over his eyes.

“...It’s only wet because of the rain.”

That was a blatant lie, but Jusetsu just gave him a silent nod. Eisei took the handkerchief off her and wiped his face.

“You’ll be walking in the dark. Take this too.” Jusetsu shoved her candlestick into his hand. With that, she spun back around and started making her way over to the Yamei Palace.

Eisei watched Jusetsu walk away for a little while, her black robe moving as she left. Just like the emperor, she never tried to ask him any questions.

He wiped his eyes with the handkerchief one more time.

He knew what she’d say. “*So what?*”

Jusetsu was just that sort of girl. He’d always known that. Sure, they might have had the same father, but why would she care?

Similarly, Eisei’s master was Koshun. If Jusetsu was a threat to him, then Eisei would despise her. That was just the way it was.

The candlestick that Jusetsu lent him lit up Eisei’s otherwise gloomy path. He stared intently at the handkerchief and then shoved it inside his breast pocket.

*The
Dusk
Jewel*

ONCE HE HAD FINISHED his prayer, Hakurai was offered some tea as a token of gratitude. He gratefully accepted it. Talking to his guardians over a cup of tea was a customary and important duty for a religious founder to carry out.

Bamboo blinds had been lowered from beneath the eaves, making the inside of the room fairly dark. In front of Hakurai was not only tea, but a number of other dishes like syrup-covered steamed rice cakes, simmered beans, and other treats.

"Is there anything else you would like? I'll have it prepared for you if so."

"No, this is plenty," Hakurai replied, courteously declining the man's offer.

"Since I started asking you to pray for me, my leg has gotten significantly better. It's been a big help." The gentleman laughed haughtily.

"I am glad."

"Meeting you has been a true stroke of good luck—for myself, and for the Saname clan as a whole. It would appear that things are going well for the silk merchant as well, the one you recommended we send to the imperial capital to sell his wares. He was very grateful for the opportunity. Apparently, he was even allowed inside the Grand Chancellor's residence," the master of the house continued, a big smile remaining fixed on his face.

He made this sound like it was something quite inconsequential, but it wasn't—the Grand Chancellor in question was Un Eitoku.

"Is that so?" Hakurai narrowed his eyes slightly.

"I can always trust your recommendations," the man said. "I'm much obliged to you."

"Well, as long as I can be of use to you, that's all that matters." Hakurai bowed his head.

The emperor should hurry up and kill Un Eitoku, he thought. The man was the most instrumental in bringing the present emperor to the throne, and people like him were the first ones who should have been eliminated once things calmed down. Those sorts would only grow

more self-important and get in the way of the next generation.

“If this works out, then my...or rather, the Saname clan’s long-cherished wish will be almost in reach...”

The speaker, the most senior member of the Saname clan, had whispered that as quietly as he possibly could.

“Eitoku has been very quiet lately,” Koshun commented quietly. He stood in front of the lotus pond.

“He has,” said Meiin, who was standing one step behind him.

“I wanted to talk to him...” Koshun said and stared at the lotus buds. White and round, they looked like a pair of hands cupped together.

I wonder how I should put it.

Even the slightest slipup in the way you worded something could upset the other person.

After gazing at the lotuses in silence for a little while, Koshun suddenly turned back toward Meiin. “I’d like to see Un Gyotoku in secret. Arrange for us to meet.”

That was Eitoku’s son. He was the vice minister for the ministry of rites, a section in the department of state affairs.

“After that,” he continued, “I’ll need to get some help from Shiki.”

Meiin didn’t ask why and instead simply said, “I understand.” He placed his hands together in a bow.

Jusetsu gazed aimlessly out of her lattice window. The doorway facing out onto the passage had been left open, but there was no draft coming through. The humidity hung dormant in the air.

“Niangniang? Niangniang!”

Startled, Jusetsu looked ahead of her again. Onkei was looking at her with his beautiful almond eyes. His eyes were as serene and pure as a hidden spring in the depths of a forest, but there was a hint of concern in them.

“It’s your turn, but would you prefer to take a little break? You don’t look very well.”

There was a Go board in between them and they had been playing a game together.

Jusetsu stared at the board and sighed. "I think so," she said, putting the stones back in the container. "I don't feel like playing anymore. Let's call it a day."

"Of course."

"You thought you weren't going to win?" Jiujiu butted in.

Jusetsu glared at her. "You couldn't be further from the truth. I was actually just about to turn things to my advantage."

Jusetsu *was* a sore loser, but it was true that she was really struggling to concentrate. Every time she remembered how Koshun and Shiki made her feel the other day, she found herself becoming uneasy and spacing out.

"Niangniang, you really don't seem like yourself—not that you seem down either. Maybe it's the weather?"

Jiujiu looked up at the sky through the open doors. It was an overcast day. It didn't look like there would be rain later, but the sky looked like it was covered by a faint film of some kind.

"It doesn't look like there's any inclement weather heading our way, so why don't we head out? After all, you got another note from the Crane Consort yesterday, didn't you? Go and pay her a visit."

"The Crane Consort..."

Jusetsu couldn't quite understand her. Was there a motive behind her excessive invitations? Or did she really just want to spend time with Jusetsu?

"I suppose I have to try to find out what she wants..." Jusetsu whispered before getting to her feet.

"You're going, then?" Jiujiu said enthusiastically.

"I don't need to wear anything too fancy," Jusetsu warned her lady-in-waiting, but she knew Jiujiu probably wasn't going to listen anyway.

"I shall send Tankai out as a messenger to notify her of your visit," Onkei said, and he left the palace building. Tankai would undoubtedly have something to say about being made to run ahead as Jusetsu's messenger yet again.

Jiujiu picked out a fine silk shanqun in pomegranate red with a scarlet jacket to match. The fine silk had golden thread embroidery, and there was a pattern featuring birds and flowers printed on the skirt.

“This will look lovely in the Hakkaku Palace’s gardenia garden,” she said.

The vivid reds went perfectly with Jusetu’s clear, pale skin. She hung the wooden fish carving that Koshun gave her from her waist.

“What about my hair?”

Jiujiu went to pick up an ivory comb, but Jusetu stopped her. “Not that one,” she said. The comb’s design took inspiration from birds and billowing waves. That too was a present from Koshun.

“I thought it would go nicely with your outfit,” Jiujiu commented.

“I don’t want to drop it anywhere.”

Jiujiu briefly looked at the comb and Jusetu in turn. Then, she grinned. “That’s true. After all, it was His Majesty who gave it to you.”

“It doesn’t matter who gave it to me,” Jusetu countered. “Combs fall out more easily than hairpins, don’t they? The Hakkaku Palace is some distance away, so it could always fall out on the way...”

“Yes, yes, you’re right. In that case, let’s use this one.”

With a big smile on her face, Jiujiu placed a golden hairpin in Jusetu’s hair. The more Jusetu said, the more it would seem like she was making excuses, so she kept quiet.

Tankai, who’d gone to the Hakkaku Palace as Jusetu’s messenger, returned with one of the palace’s ladies-in-waiting. It was Ki Senjo.

“I’ve come to pick you up,” she said.

“I don’t really need an escort,” said Jusetu, puzzled.

“The Crane Consort was overjoyed to hear you were coming and insisted that I pick you up—so here I am,” Senjo laughed. “She’s worried that you might change your mind.”

How over-the-top, Jusetu thought.

Seemingly understanding what Jusetu was thinking, Senjo carried on. “The Crane Consort is so looking forward to being able to talk to you. It has her acting like an innocent little kid. Ever since

leaving Ga Province, she's been surrounded by the same ladies-in-waiting, and since the other consorts are a little bit older than her, she hasn't been able to get close to any of them..."

It sounded like she was bored.

"Oh, right," Jusetsu replied.

Jusetsu's eyes then found their way toward Senjo's belt. There was something hanging from it. The white coral decoration that she had last time they met was gone, but now she was wearing a fish decoration—much like Jusetsu's.

"Oh, are you looking at this?" said Senjo, noticing where Jusetsu's gaze was directed. She picked up the decoration in her hand and let out an embarrassed laugh. "I did question whether it might be inappropriate, but I had a copy made of that decoration you have."

"Mine? Why?"

"I'm no longer a follower of the Eight True Teachings..." Since they placed a curse on her, it made sense. "Since you were the one who saved me, I thought I'd like to wear the same decoration that you do—as a lucky charm."

"I doubt it'll bring you any luck."

"No, but it's all about the way it makes me feel. It's proof that I admire you."

Should Jusetsu have felt happy about that? She wasn't sure.

Also accompanied by Jiujiu, Jusetsu headed to the Hakkaku Palace with Onkei and Tankai following along as her bodyguards. Senjo guided her through the gate, where she was greeted by the sight of gardenias. On the other side, Banka—the Crane Consort—was there, with her ladies-in-waiting at her side.

Jusetsu sensed the court ladies' gazes shift to the people on either side of her, and they seemed dazzled. The women were looking at Onkei and Tankai in particular. It seemed as if the pair of beautiful eunuchs had captivated them.

"You're finally here! I'm so thrilled." Banka's dark eyes were sparkling as she said that. She really *was* a harmless little girl. "We're similar in age, aren't we? The other consorts are all older than me, you see. It makes it so hard to get close to them."

Banka seemed even more excitable than she did the last time they met. She led Jusetsu to a room in the palace building and sat down. There was a lovely view of a garden, just beyond the outer corridor. The strong fragrance of gardenias poured in through the open doorway.

Doesn't she find such a strong smell overwhelming? Jusetsu couldn't help but wonder.

"The truth is, I never even wanted to be a consort. I was so nervous to leave my hometown, and I didn't even know what His Majesty was like. But my dad *insisted* that I come here," Banka said without reservation as she drank the tea her ladies-in-waiting had brought for her. "Still, it turned out that His Majesty was nice, so I'm glad I came. I don't know what I would have done if he were arrogant and horrible, like my eldest brother is—or spiteful, like my second eldest brother. I really hoped that he'd be as kind and even-tempered as my great-uncle...but if he *did* turn out to be like my great-uncle, then he'd be an old man, you know? I wouldn't like that either. But...you know what I mean, don't you? It was a relief that His Majesty was so young. Well, he's still older than me, but..."

Banka was particularly chatty. Jusetsu listened to her, stuffing her own cheeks full of peaches as she did so.

"How are those peaches? They've been simmered in syrup. Where I come from, the peaches are a little smaller and more bitter, so we simmer them to make them sweet enough to eat. The peaches here are sweet enough to start with."

"They're delicious," Jusetsu responded.

Banka looked overjoyed. "I'm glad to hear it! We add cloves to the syrup, and use the peaches while they're still firm..."

"Is there something worrying you?" Jusetsu asked.

"What...?" A smile came to Banka's face, and she stopped.

"You're abnormally giddy. You must be anxious about something—it seems like your mind is elsewhere."

"...Oh," Banka passed her hand across her face. "Do you have the ability to see through things?"

"No, I don't." Jusetsu put another simmered peach in her mouth. "Does it have something to do with the emperor? Or maybe it's related to your hometown?"

Those were the two topics that Banka had just mentioned, so Jusetsu suspected that they might have been on her mind.

“My gosh, no. Well, I can’t deny that my hometown has been troubling me, but...” Banka had a hazy, far-off look in her eyes. “Would you mind me venting some of my worries to you? They’re not the kind of problems that I’d want you to solve or anything—but sometimes, I just can’t bear it anymore. Would you...listen to me for a little while?”

As she said those words, Banka looked more like a terribly frail child who had nowhere to turn.

Banka dismissed her ladies-in-waiting and invited Jusetsu into the garden. Jusetsu left Jiujiu in the room as well and accompanied Banka out into the garden alone. There were more gardenias planted there, and their sweet but sharp scent filled the air. Although many of the flowers had lost their petals from being battered in the rain, that actually seemed to make the smell even stronger.

“In my clan, there’s a family heirloom that gets passed down through the generations,” Banka began as they slowly walked between the flowers.

“A family heirloom?”

“Yes. It’s called the Dusk Jewel.”

“The Dusk Jewel...” Jusetsu repeated after her.

“It’s a rare, precious jewel that’s a mixture of different colors, just like a sunset... There’s orange, pink, red, and there’s violet in it too. It’s really beautiful, but...it’s also pretty scary.”

“Scary? How come?”

Banka stopped in her tracks and turned around. “It’s cursed.”

Jusetsu’s eyes opened wide. *Cursed?*

“Did you know that my clan originated in Kakami?” Banka changed the subject as she fiddled with the petals of a gardenia flower.

“I did,” replied Jusetsu.

“Then, did you know why my clan *left* Kakami?”

Jusetsu cocked her head to one side. “No, I don’t.”

Banka glanced over at Jusetsu. “It’s because they killed a god.”

...*They killed a god?*

Jusetsu silently waited for Banka to elaborate.

“In the region of Kakami where my ancestors lived, people used to worship a certain god. The god of good harvests—the god of the soil and the land. But at one point, my ancestors started wanting to have this god all to themselves. So, they offered the god a deal—they would give their youngest daughter to him as a wife if he became our clan’s protective deity.”

“Their youngest daughter...” *Wasn’t Banka the youngest daughter too?* Jusetsu thought.

“The god allegedly accepted, and it was decided that the youngest daughter would marry him. They got everything prepared for the wedding and entered the cave where the god dwelled. But then...” Banka yanked off a gardenia petal. “The god’s shriek echoed throughout the cave. The person dressed in the bridal outfit was not the youngest daughter, but actually an attendant in disguise. The attendant stabbed the god to death with a hidden sword. The head of the Saname clan never intended to give his daughter to the god as a wife in the first place. What he *really* wanted was the jewel that the god had. The jewel allowed one to cause long periods of rain and drought at will—and it was inside the god’s belly. The attendant sliced open the god’s stomach and took it. Oh, and apparently, that god looked like a big toad.”

Banka tossed a petal she ripped off a flower onto the ground. She then looked toward Jusetsu. She wasn’t smiling, but she didn’t look sad either—the look on her face was very peculiar.

“That jewel was the Dusk Jewel. The Saname clan planned to use that jewel to govern the land, but the murder turned the people against them. They loathed our clan. Forget ruling the land at that point—it became hard for them to even continue on with life as normal there. In the end, they were driven out of the region. Despised as god killers wherever they went, the clan had no choice but to flee far, far away.”

That was why the Saname clan had come to Sho. Banka looked at Jusetsu with her coal-black eyes and gave her a slight smile.

“Now, let me get down to the crux of the issue. Not long after the god was killed, the youngest daughter—suffering from a high fever with an unknown cause—passed away. She was just fifteen. Then, when the eldest son took over as head of the family, *his* youngest daughter also

passed away the year she celebrated her fifteenth birthday—of a high fever, of course. After that, the youngest daughters of those who inherited the Saname clan all died at the age of fifteen. Someone started saying that it was a curse for silencing and murdering the god. A few heads of the clan even tried to destroy the jewel. They asked the strongest men and the most highly regarded shamans for help, but none of them were able to break it. Some suggested that if it couldn't be broken, it should be thrown away—but no matter if they left it in the mountains or threw it in the ocean, it always came back. The curse just wouldn't go away, and before long, they gave up on disposing of it."

Banka paused to breathe, but before Jusetsu had the chance to get a word in, she started talking again.

"My father told me this story when I was twelve, and he showed me the Dusk Jewel too. It was pretty, but scary. Scary and sinister... It had a beautiful color to it too—it almost looked as if it had absorbed people's pain and sorrow." She narrowed her eyes, seeming to be recalling this memory fondly.

Jusetsu stared at Banka from the side, then began to speak. "...But you must be older than fifteen, mustn't you?"

The moment Jusetsu posed this question, Banka winced.

"I'm seventeen," she said in a voice resembling out-of-tune birdsong. "The youngest Saname daughters die at fifteen... That hasn't changed. So, why do you think I'm still alive?"

Jusetsu didn't reply. She just frowned.

"One day, the head of the Saname clan conducted an experiment. It was an outrageous idea, if you ask me—and I can't believe he decided to try it out." Banka laughed a little, but her smile was a scornful one. "He adopted a girl younger than his youngest daughter—one of the servant girls. He wanted to know whether the curse only affected those with Saname blood, or whether the target only had to be the youngest daughter in name. I am living proof of how that experiment turned out. The 'real' youngest daughter made it to sixteen without dying, and the adoptive daughter died at the age of fifteen. Ever since, the Saname clan has always adopted a girl before their youngest daughter turns fifteen—with the sole purpose of sacrificing her in place of their real daughter." Banka looked at Jusetsu. "What do you think of that custom?"

Jusetsu stared back at Banka. *Her eyes look rather sad*, she thought.

“...Are you telling me you’ve survived because an adopted girl was sacrificed in your place?”

“Yes, that’s right.” The agony and sorrow on Banka’s face got even stronger. “I chose that. I...”

“You chose it?” Jusetsu asked.

“The year I turned thirteen, the adoptee came. She’d been working as someone’s servant and didn’t have any relatives of her own. She was a year younger than me. Up until that point, she hadn’t had a name, so I named her Shozen. Shozen was fragile and looked younger than she actually was. She always seemed anxious, like a shivering little puppy.”

Banka forced a faint smile. Her lips were curved upwards, but they resembled a gaping wound more than anything else.

“She was sweet and really made you feel sorry for her... I grew to love my helpless little sister. I gave her lots of delicious food and played with her all the time. She was so precious to me...” Banka cast her eyes downward. “And so, I begged my father to spare Shozen. I didn’t want her to die... As strict as my father was, I thought that if I begged as hard as I could, he might listen.”

“But he didn’t?”

Banka shook her head. A pained look came to her face, and she started trembling slightly.

“My father said that was fine. We could send Shozen back to the house she came from and save her life—but as a result, that would be it for me.”

Jusetsu gulped at that.

“‘It’s obvious,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t make sense for you to want to save Shozen, but not to care whether another servant girl dies. If you want to save Shozen, you have to choose to die. There’s no other way of doing it.’ And so...I made my choice. I chose to live,” Banka said, her voice almost a whisper. “Shozen came down with a high fever when she was fifteen and died. As for me... Well... I haven’t been sick at all.” Banka’s voice had turned hoarse by the end of her tale.

So that’s what happened, Jusetsu thought.

This young girl was now beaten down, a mere shadow of the

person she'd been earlier. For a moment, it looked like she was about to crumble.

"...You can't say that you *chose* that," said Jusetsu. "You were forced into making that choice."

By her ancestor's wrongdoings, the curse...and her own father.

"There's another reason why the Saname clan won't let go of the Dusk Jewel. It's not just because we can't. Do you have any idea what that reason is?" said Banka, smoothly changing the subject.

Jusetsu was stumped. "...No," she responded.

"The Saname clan have a long-cherished wish. In order to fulfill it, they want to keep hold of the jewel—the divine treasure."

"And what is that wish?"

"To return to Kakami and become the country's rulers. Sounds like a pipe dream, doesn't it? It's so stupid," Banka laughed. "Still...talking about this has made me feel a bit better. Thank you so much. I've never told anybody about this before."

Banka exhaled, laughed, and stretched. She must have been sending Jusetsu constant invites all that time because she wanted to open up to her. She then snapped one of the gardenia stalks and placed it in Jusetsu's hair, a white flower at one end.

"How pretty. It looks really good on you. Even nicer than your peonies." She narrowed her eyes and stared at Jusetsu. Then, she let out a satisfied giggle and spun back around in the direction they'd come. "Shall we drink some more tea? We can talk about something fun this time."

With the subject closed, Banka began making her way back to the room with a spring in her step.

That night, something unusual happened—Koshun arrived at the Yamei Palace while it was still light outside.

"I'm a little busy, so I can't stay long, but I thought I'd come by and see how things were progressing," Koshun said casually. He didn't even sit down.

"There's no need for you to come if you're busy," Jusetsu replied, shocked.

Koshun didn't really say anything, and just stared at Jusetsu's face.

"...What is it?" she asked.

He replied simply. "As long as you're well, that's fine."

What did he mean by that? Jusetsu thought, but by the time that question crossed her mind, he'd already left the building.

Jusetsu watched him leave, then stood up herself. Shinshin started to make a racket as Jusetsu went to leave the room, but she ignored the bird and followed after the emperor, anyway.

"Koshun," Jusetsu called out to the emperor after she caught up with him.

He seemed more than a little bit surprised. "...Did you have something you had to tell me?"

"No," Jusetsu replied. "I'll see you off until you've left the Yamei Palace."

"See me off?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes," Jusetsu said, but she honestly wasn't too sure what she was doing herself.

Koshun had been rushing, but he slowed his pace to match Jusetsu's. Eisei glanced back at the Raven Consort. He wasn't giving her a stern look though, and he soon spun his head back around.

Jusetsu considered bringing up Banka, but that wasn't the kind of conversation that could be resolved in the short time it would take them to reach the edge of the Yamei Palace's premises. It wasn't as if it needed to be discussed urgently either.

Koshun seemed to feel the same way about conversation topics as she did. "There are a few things I'd like to talk to you about, but it'd be hard to condense and summarize them now," he said. "I'll tell you next time we meet."

"Are you really that busy?" Jusetsu asked.

"I am a *little* busy," Koshun replied.

The two of them then went on to share a fairly meaningless conversation. Once they entered the wooded area, the thick leaves made their surroundings a little darker, but the air still felt just as humid.

Once they'd reached the edge of the woods, Jusetsu stopped there.

Koshun turned around to face her. "All right, I shall come by again," he said.

There's no need for that, Jusetsu could imagine herself saying not too long ago.

"Fine," Jusetsu answered instead, and she then watched Koshun disappear into the distance.

His shadow grew darker, as if the sun had been covered by clouds. Jusetsu was then left behind in the shady woodland, alone.

The caw of the star raven echoed through the air.

When Koshun got back to the inner court, he went to the Koshi Palace. He'd called Shiki there previously.

The Koshi Palace stood quiet and alone in the corner of the inner court. It was a small and unconventional-looking palace building with a plain exterior, and it was unclear why this palace was the way it was. Its pillars weren't even painted red. Its decorative roof tiles featured an old man riding atop a large turtle, and the building had cast-iron lanterns hanging from its eaves. Inside, there were copper plated banners lined up along the walls, and as one walked past them, they would sway and make rustling sounds. Constellations in gold paint decorated the stone floor.

In the center, there were no real furnishings apart from a folding screen, a divan, and a table. Shiki was kneeling next to the divan. Koshun took a seat on it and told him to look up.

"There's somewhere I'd like you to go," he said calmly.

Shiki glanced up at Koshun and nodded. "Of course," he said.

"It's a mansion in Torinbo. It's near Meiin's house."

Shiki looked up, startled. "Do you mean...?"

"I'll assign somebody from the northern imperial defense army to act as your bodyguard," Koshun said.

That meant it would be one of the army's soldiers. Torinbo was the neighborhood where the Un family home was situated.

"I'd like you to meet with Eitoku," the emperor continued. "If you

tell him that I ordered you to visit him, I'm sure he will find time to speak with you."

Shiki silently waited to hear what his objective in meeting Eitoku was going to be. Koshun leaned forward slightly to get closer to Shiki's level, seeing as he was still on his knees.

Eitoku had been Koshun's beloved master since he was just a little boy. An image of the man crossed Koshun's mind, and then disappeared again.

When the early evening's duskiess gave way to darkness, the Yamei Palace became a noisier place.

Shinshin was the first to make a racket, but before there was any sign of a visitor at the door, a voice rung out instead. It sounded almost like a shriek.

"Raven Consort! Raven Consort, please help me!"

It was Senjo's voice. She was extremely distraught. Juseitsu hurriedly opened the door and Senjo leaped inside.

"Raven Consort...!"

Being a lady-in-waiting, she wasn't used to running, but it seemed like she put all she could into rushing to the Yamei Palace. She collapsed onto the floor, out of breath. Jiujiu went to fetch some water from the kitchen while Juseitsu dashed over to her and helped her up. She rubbed Senjo's back as the woman had a coughing fit. Juseitsu then got her to drink some water and waited for her to calm down.

"Has something happened?" Juseitsu asked as soon as she came back to her senses.

"Banka... The Crane Consort suddenly collapsed."

"Collapsed?" Juseitsu asked. "Has she come down with a sudden illness?"

"No... I'm not sure. She's suffering from a high fever."

A *high fever*? Juseitsu then recalled what Banka said about a curse earlier that day.

"We've called a doctor, but there was something strange about when she collapsed..."

“What was it?”

“This evening, a delivery arrived from the Saname household... That happens quite regularly, and they often send piece goods, accessories, things like that. Today, they sent a few different accessories over, but there was something strange mixed in with them. It was a bracelet. The moment she put it on, she collapsed.”

“Could it have been coated in poison...?” Jusetu asked.

Senjo shook her head. “That was the first thing I suspected, so I immediately took it off her and checked.” However, there was no evidence that poison had been painted on or put inside the bracelet.

The woman continued. “Then, Banka suddenly came down with a fever... What should we do, Raven Consort?”

This wasn’t something Jusetu could give much advice on. “I’m no doctor...” she said.

“Is there any way we could make her better? A prayer or something like that? Will you at least come and see her?”

Jusetu was at a loss. How was seeing her supposed to help? There was, however, one thing that worried her, and that was the fact that Banka had come down with a high fever, just like the victims of the Saname clan’s curse.

“I can’t say for definite that I’ll be able to do anything...” Jusetu started, getting to her feet. “For the time being, however, I suppose I can check on how she is.”

“Thank you so much,” Senjo said. She prostrated herself in front of the Raven Consort in a show of gratitude. It looked as if she was praying before a god—and made Jusetu feel awkward.

Jusetu then hurried over to the Hakkaku Palace, bringing only her bodyguards—Onkei and Tankai—with her.

The moment she passed through the gate at the Hakkaku Palace, Jusetu could tell that there was a restless atmosphere surrounding the premises. Eunuchs and court ladies were hurriedly dashing up and down the passages, while ladies-in-waiting were streaming in and out of Banka’s room. When Jusetu entered the consort’s room, she found Banka lying down on her bed. Her face was visibly red. The fever was making her eyes water, and the girl was panting in pain.

“The doctor just left... He supplied a decoction to bring her fever

down, but she's not in a state to drink it," an older lady-in-waiting explained. This woman was Kitsuo Rokujo, the longest-serving of Banka's ladies-in-waiting, and she was taking care of Banka at her bedside. The woman was extremely pale, and despite trying as hard as she could to stay calm, she was shaking.

"Where is the bracelet in question?" Jusetsu asked.

One of the ladies-in-waiting brought over a box that had been sitting on the table. Inside it was a golden bracelet.

Gold? Jusetsu thought. *Why gold, when silver is Banka's favorite?*

Holding the box, Jusetsu stared at the bracelet and frowned.

Is this...?

She could recognize items like this immediately—just like she had when she was helping Senjo.

"This...is cursed."

The ladies-in-waiting in the room either gasped or let out a slight shriek.

"Wh-what do you mean, Raven Consort?" Rokujo asked, panicked.

"Someone has placed a curse on this bracelet. Didn't you say this was a delivery from the Saname household?"

"Yes, but...it wasn't supposed to be for Banka."

"What?"

"Banka wrote a letter home saying that there was another consort around her same age who she wanted to befriend. Perhaps that's she was sent this as a gift for her."

"Wait. What do you mean? Another consort around her age? Surely you don't mean..."

"She was referring to *you*, Raven Consort."

Jusetsu looked back at the bracelet. "This was supposed to be for me..." Now it made sense why it was gold rather than silver.

"Precisely. But when Banka saw the bracelet, she said it was cute and that it wouldn't suit you. She decided to give you the hairpin that had been sent for her instead, and to use the bracelet herself."

"In other words, she swapped them. She took the item that was originally intended for me."

Rokujo nodded at that.

The curse was supposed to be placed on me.

This curse intended to take Jusetsu's life. Someone was trying to kill her. But why?

Jusetsu carefully examined the bracelet. It was made of gold and had a milky-white gem embedded in it. There was a picture engraved where the jewel was set as a decoration. Shocked by what she was seeing, Jusetsu strained her eyes.

The engraving depicted a toad, which was holding the jewel. That was what the workmanship was showing off.

A toad—just like the god that the Saname clan had killed.

Jusetsu peeled back the sheet that lined the bracelet's wooden box. A talisman was stuck to the base of it. Although it was difficult to make out the letters themselves, the way the ink faded away as the brush flowed over the paper and the appearance of each upward and sweeping brushstroke reflected the idiosyncrasies of the writer, just like in normal text. The writing on it looked familiar, and in fact looked very similar to the brushwork on the talisman used to place a curse on Senjo.

Banka whispered something, and Jusetsu listened closely to what she was saying. "Hakurai...must have..."

"Hakurai? Are you trying to say that this curse was Hakurai's doing?"

Banka gave a small nod. "I...hate...that man..." She was only just about managing to squeeze out the words under her ragged breaths and was half-delirious. "He's always...sucking up...to my dad..."

Hakurai—the man who founded the Eight True Teachings—had attempted to place a curse on Jusetsu, the Raven Consort. Could he have been behind Senjo's curse too? What if he placed that curse on Senjo to perhaps test the Raven Consort's powers, or maybe to spite her?

"Raven Consort, what should we do?" Rokujo asked, sounding totally drained.

"...We have to break the curse."

There was an audible outpouring of relief and admiration from the

ladies-in-waiting. Jusetu asked them to leave the room so that she could be alone with Banka. She then placed the bracelet and the box side by side on the table and stared at them.

The toad's incantation.

Jusetu remembered hearing about the toad's incantation before. It was one that shamans used. Different people used different items for the spell—one could use toads, snakes, or even poisonous insects. This bracelet had featured an image of a toad with a grayish, milk-white stone embedded into it. This kind of stone was called the toad stone and was said to be obtained from a toad's head.

One theory that said that while silver was condensed moonlight, gold was condensed sunlight. Uren Niangniang—who was also Yeyoushen, the nighttime wanderer—was sensitive to light. Was this why they'd chosen to give Jusetu a golden gift?

Jusetu glanced over at the ailing Banka. Her face was flushed, and her forehead and neck were damp with sweat. The girl's breathing was rapid and shallow. Jusetu wiped her sweat away with a handkerchief that had been put by her side. Banka opened her eyes slightly and tried to look at Jusetu, but they were out of focus.

"Raven Consort," she seemed to be saying with her hoarse voice.

"Don't worry. I shall break the curse," Jusetu said simply.

It wasn't clear whether Banka had heard her or not, but the girl frowned slightly before closing her eyes.

Jusetu pulled a peony flower out of her hairdo. For something like a toad or a snake incantation, the spell required you to break the hex item being used.

The flower turned into a pale red smoke and drifted about the room. Jusetu pulled it in toward her using a finger and molded it into the shape of an arrow. She then grabbed hold of the arrow and aimed it toward the toad stone in the bracelet. She swung it down in one fell swoop.

The arrowhead pierced the toad stone—or at least, it should have.

"Argh!"

Just as Jusetu thought the arrow was hitting the stone, it wavered, dissolved, and melted away. The arrow was gone, as if it had been swallowed up.

“Was that...?”

It was the same thing that happened when she tried to pierce the Owl with one of her arrows. *Why did that happen?*

Last time, the reason had been explained to her.

“It’s pointless for people like us to fight one another. We’re from the same family. If you do want to fight me, then you’ll have to use your bird device,” the Owl had said.

Jusetsu stared down at the bracelet. She was able to reverse Senjo’s curse, but why wouldn’t this one break?

Then, she realized something important. It was a *toad* incantation—like the god whose wrath the Saname clan had incurred.

“A divine power...?”

The Saname clan had been cursed, but they also possessed a divine treasure—one containing the power of a god.

They must be able to take advantage of that.

Jusetsu looked up from the bracelet and ran over to the window. She threw the lattice open. The stars were twinkling in the dark night sky that extended out above her.

Which way is the Yamei Palace? Jusetsu wracked her brains. She realized it didn’t matter which direction it was in—she just had to call out the right name. The Owl had already given her the answer she needed.

“...Sumaru!”

Jusetsu’s shrill voice echoed throughout the dark night sky. The moments passed and felt painfully long until she heard the sound of fluttering wings approaching.

The sound of wings flapping followed by croaky cawing came tearing through the still night air. Jusetsu spotted some white spots in the darkness, followed by brown wings. She reached out her arm, and the star raven frantically flapped its wings as it descended and perched on her. Its claws dug into her skin, making her wince a little—but this was no time to complain.

“Sumaru, lend me one of your feathers.”

The star raven cawed, as if to say, *“Go ahead.”*

She plucked a single feather from the bird's wing. She then waved her arm, and Sumaru took off to fly away. The feather transformed into a double-edged sword. Its gleaming blade was brown and had star-like speckles on it. Jusetu tested it and cut through the air. The sword made an airy, swooping sound as it moved.

She then stood in front of the table. Keeping her eyes glued to the bracelet, she lifted up the sword. Then, with all her might, Jusetu swung it down.

The blade made a *clunk* sound as it made contact. She felt some resistance, seeming to push back against her force. The toad stone started to emit an ashy brown smoke, wrapping around and enveloping the bracelet. It seemed like it was trying to protect it.

Jusetu held her ground and channeled even more of her strength into forcing the sword against the stone. At last, it felt as if she'd broken through some kind of film. Then, she heard a violent splash of water. An ear-splitting, piercing and cry echoed throughout the room.

The unpleasant screech continued to trail off for a long time, gradually becoming quieter and feebler. It eventually faded into nothing. When Jusetu looked at last, she found that the smoke was gone, the stone had been crushed, and the bracelet had split right in two. As she gazed at it, the bracelet crumbled into ash and lost its shape entirely.

Silence returned to the room. Jusetu let out a sigh of relief.

Someone then knocked on the door.

"Raven Consort, what in the world was that cry...?" It was Rokujo.

"You may come in now," Jusetu said. The doors opened and several of the ladies-in-waiting who were waiting nervously walked inside.

Rokujo was the first to dash over to Banka's bedside. "Her fever...!" she cried out. The lady-in-waiting touched her forehead in shock.

Banka's face was back to its usual color, and her breathing was even and calm. The girl was now sleeping comfortably.

"Raven Consort."

The ladies-in-waiting all simultaneously fell to their knees in front of Jusetu. It looked as if they were prostrating themselves in front of

some kind of god in adoration.

“Thank you very much, Raven Consort...”

“There’s no need to thank me,” Juseitsu replied. “That curse was directed at me in the first place.”

The way the ladies-in-waiting were behaving made Juseitsu take a step back. She was no god—being worshipped like this was deeply uncomfortable.

“No! If it wasn’t for you, who knows what would have happened...”

Rokujo burst into tears, perhaps overwhelmed by relief. Some of the other ladies-in-waiting then started crying as well while the others comforted them. Before long, the room bustled with activity.

Juseitsu gently made her way through the ladies and snuck out of the room. Onkei and Tankai were waiting on the other side of the doors.

“Are you injured?” Onkei asked.

“No,” Juseitsu replied, and then she started walking away.

She was extremely tired. Once she made it to the other side of the gate, she stumbled—but she didn’t fall as Onkei and Tankai both reached out their hands to support her at the same time.

“Let me carry you,” said Onkei.

He turned his back toward her and crouched down. Usually, Juseitsu would have declined, but even talking was too bothersome for her at the moment. Instead, she kept her mouth shut and crawled onto Onkei’s back.

Why was this Hakurai, the founder of the Eight True Teachings, trying to curse me to death?

While the Owl had also tried to kill Juseitsu, he didn’t actually bear any resentment toward her. He simply had no other choice.

This curse, however, was different. It was clearly devised to make her die a painful death.

It was a chilling thought.

Does someone have a grudge against me? Juseitsu wondered. Was there someone out there who truly despised her?

These unanswered questions left Jusetsu feeling shaken up. She couldn't bring herself to move. She had no idea what to do anymore. And, to make matters worse, she didn't even know whether it was *her* who was feeling shaky and fearful, or if it was the Raven.

I know nothing.

Jusetsu felt like she was still that scared little child, crouching down in the darkness with nobody to tell her where to go. Reijo raised Jusetsu to walk on her own two feet, to get by without needing or asking for help from anyone. That was how the Raven Consort was.

Jusetsu too had been planning on living a life where she didn't request anybody's help, and yet here she was.

In the darkness, against the warmth of Onkei's back, Jusetsu wanted to scream out for help from the bottom of her heart for the first time in her entire life.

Shiki was led into the hallway of the Un family residence. He didn't sit in the seat he was offered, but instead stood and waited for Un Eitoku. He instructed the soldier who was acting as his bodyguard to wait outside.

The room was very plain. The table and cabinet appeared to have been made out of quality sandalwood, but they hadn't been painted with expensive black lacquer nor decorated with any sort of inlay. Even the blue and white porcelain dish the flower vase stood on didn't look especially valuable.

This wasn't entirely unexpected—even just by looking at Eitoku, it was clear he wasn't the sort to enjoy the finer things in life. He was clean and well-kept, but he was by no means a man of luxury. In fact, it was possible that many distinguished families lived relatively modest lives despite their statuses.

After inadvertently giving Shiki the time to fully evaluate the room's furnishings, Eitoku arrived. He cast a cold glance toward Shiki.

At times like this, Shiki always felt totally exposed. Members of esteemed families always looked at down at him, as if he lacked a single worldly possession. It must have been subconscious on their part—and as such, all it took was a look from them to reveal exactly what they were thinking.

"You may sit down," Eitoku said to Shiki. He took a seat himself.

"It's all right. I'm fine standing."

It would have been better to obediently oblige, but Shiki stubbornly refused. His Majesty never looked at him the way Eitoku was. The emperor's gaze was always neutral and transparent, and he simply looked at him with a sense of calm. As a result, Shiki was fine to follow his orders. Koshun was dignified and noble, and didn't let his polite demeanor slip, even when faced with someone like himself.

"So?" Eitoku said, giving him a sharp look. "What kind of urgent business do you need from me at a time like this?"

"I'm visiting you under His Majesty's orders."

Eitoku's mustache twitched. "His Majesty?" he said. "What order has he given you?"

"I heard that a certain silk trader from Ga Province has been enjoying your frequent patronage as of late."

"I appreciate his wares. That's all it is," Eitoku replied. "People associate Ga Province with the Saname clan. Don't tell me His Majesty suspects that I might be in cahoots with them, plotting to commit treason!"

After making that frank statement, Eitoku laughed. Shiki, on the other hand, stayed straight-faced and stared at him.

Eitoku grimaced uncomfortably. "Hurry up and tell me what you want. You might say that you're dragging me away to testify in his presence, but I won't believe you. His Majesty would never be so foolish. So, go ahead, spit it out. This is not the time for dillydallying."

The older man had a sense of confidence and calm in his voice that his long years supporting Koshun had given him. It was the sort of calm that stemmed from trust—trust in the emperor's intelligence.

A gentle smile finally came to Shiki's lips. "I very much agree," he said.

Eitoku looked suspicious at that.

"I apologize for saying something impertinent just to test you," Shiki continued. "I've come here with a message from His Majesty. 'Tell Reiko Shiki everything you have found out, and then send him back as a messenger.'"

Still silent, Eitoku opened his eyes wide.

“Feel free to tell me whatever you may know. I will act as appropriate.”

“...Has his Majesty noticed something?” Eitoku asked.

“As you just said, His Majesty is no fool. His Majesty knows you very well, and you him. You must have been conducting an investigation, using your good relationship with the silk merchant as a front. You’ve been using your ‘ears’ in the inner palace to investigate the Saname clan as well.”

Shiki took one step closer to Eitoku and lowered his voice. “The thing that His Majesty wants to know the most is who the Eight True Teachings are working with. It’s not Saname Choyo by any chance, is it?”

Eitoku stared intently into Shiki’s eyes, then gave him a firm nod.

The copper banners crumbled into pieces. Hakurai had been standing in the middle of the room, but he groaned and sank to the ground, covering his left eye with his hand.

The toad incantation had been broken.

He couldn’t believe it. Did she *still* have that much strength left? The incantation had even made use of the divine treasure’s power. It didn’t make sense.

He was in pain. The left half of his face felt as if it was burning. Warm liquid poured out from behind the hand he clasped against his face. Blood dripped onto his clothing, and then the floor.

“Argh...” Hakurai moaned with pain as he rummaged inside his breast pocket for something.

He took out a divine treasure—the Dusk Jewel—but it had broken into pieces. As it sat in his palm, it turned to dust and vanished.

You imbecile.

Hakurai pressed his handkerchief against his bleeding eye and staggered out through the doors. There was even more noise coming from the main house on the premises. Torchlights were visible in the distance. Hakurai put his hand on the wall and made his way down the corridor toward the main house on wobbling legs.

He could hear a voice, one belonging to the master of the residence—the eldest, most senior member of the Saname clan.

“What in the world are you playing at, Choyo? You can’t turn your blade on me!”

Hakurai turned the corner of the passage and stepped out in front of the main building. The master of the residence stood in front of its doors in his nightclothes, standing face-to-face with another man.

The one he addressed was a man in his forties with a fearless-looking face. He was accompanied by his retainers, standing behind him with torches in their hands.

He was the current head of the Saname clan, Choyo.

“Do you think you can talk your way out of this, Uncle? I know that you sent one of your men to the imperial capital to try to gain the Un family’s favor. It’s part of your plot to regain your own rights.”

“And what of it? I’m the most senior member of this clan, not you.”

Choyo gave his uncle a stony glare. Despite that being true, it was no excuse for his actions.

“Yes. In our clan, we cherish our elders, and your seniority is the precise reason I’ve been turning a blind eye so far.” Choyo let out a somewhat contrived-sounding sigh. “Have you—in your old age—forgotten what you did when you schemed with that good-for-nothing Ga Province chief who bought his position with money? You falsified the manor’s profits, pocketed the money yourself, and bribed the chief to overlook it. My subordinate was planning on reporting that foul play to the central government, and you poisoned and murdered him. Following the downfall of the empress dowager, the chief was dismissed, and you—having backed yourself into a corner—came begging to me for help. If that had come to light, punishment would have befallen the whole Saname clan, not just yourself. I managed to clean up your mess and protect you. All I asked in return was that you retreat into obscurity and stay within the confines of your own home. Was that really too much to ask?”

Choyo directed a spine-chilling glare at his uncle, who was now as white as a sheet. The older man’s white hair was a mess, and he no longer had even a shred of the dignity one would expect from the most senior member of the clan. He stumbled backward, but his knees—

which had become a regular source of pain due to his old age—appeared to give out, and he fell onto his bottom instead.

“B-but I...! I just wanted to fulfill the Saname clan’s wish. I want us to become more powerful and go back to... To go home to Kakami. That’s all. You *must* understand where I’m coming from.” The aging, most senior member of the Saname clan looked up at Choyo from below, as if he was begging for his sympathy.

Choyo simply looked down at him, an icy look in his eyes. “You’re not thinking about the Saname clan. You’re just thinking about yourself. Chief Secretariat Un is of a different caliber than that old Ga Province chief. Your silly bribes won’t work on him. In fact, your contact with Chief Secretariat Un will arouse suspicions instead, and it won’t be long until your past comes to light. And that’s not all... The observation vice-envoy you poisoned has become a scholar now, and he’s serving the emperor. You can’t afford to fool around anymore. The whole Saname clan will be punished—and you will be the one to blame.”

Choyo placed his hand on the hilt of the sword that hung from his waist. “I must take your life now so that I can ask His Majesty for forgiveness. Let your head be of use to us, even if the rest of you is not.”

Choyo then brandished his weapon. It was an impressive maneuver. With a single stroke of his sword, he sliced the man’s head off his body and sent it flying through the air. Blood spurted out everywhere. Choyo took a step back to avoid the splatter, while his retainers waiting behind him ran to the body and head to clean them up.

Choyo then looked over at Hakurai, who kneeled down on the ground. After staring down at the man, Choyo announced, “I shall have you leave Ga Province.”

He was being exiled.

“Yes, sir,” Hakurai responded obediently.

“...Have you hurt your eye?” he asked.

“I have.”

“I’ll make sure you have it seen to, at least,” said Choyo. “Take this man inside. And call a doctor.” Several attendants came over to them then.

Just as Choyo was about to leave, Hakurai spoke up from behind

him. "Injo is in the annex. She's just a little girl. I'll take her with me."

Choyo turned back, looked at Hakurai for a moment, then gave a signal to one of the attendants. "Learn from this and stop this 'religious founder' nonsense."

After leaving Hakurai those parting words, Choyo walked off once and for all.

Hakurai watched intently as the man disappeared into the darkness.

"I heard that Saname Choyo has beheaded his uncle by his own hand," Meiin said.

Koshun nodded. "It's difficult to cut somebody's head off using one stroke of the sword. Choyo must be quite the swordsman."

Meiin's expression seemed to read, "*Not exactly*," which made Koshun smile a little.

"It sounded like he was at a loss what to do with him for years. I imagine it was even more difficult to handle since they were relatives," Meiin commented.

"Well, he was his elder. Choyo may have been the head of the clan, but I'm sure he showed some restraint because the man was not only older than him, but also his uncle," the emperor remarked. "If he treated him poorly, the whole clan could have turned on him. The Saname clan respect their elders above all else, after all. The man was a thorn in his side, so to speak."

Koshun narrowed his eyes as he gazed at the lotus pond. It was drizzling now. The white lotuses stood out like stars amid the misty, hazy scenery that stretched out in front of him.

"...And that thorn is no longer there anymore," the emperor said.

"Precisely."

"He took rather aggressive approach, barging into his residence and beheading him without waiting for the provincial ruling."

"Indeed, he did," replied Meiin.

Choyo's uncle contacted Un Eitoku and tried to get him to pressure Choyo to reinstate him as the administrator of his former manor. He promised to give Eitoku the profits from under-reporting the

manor's income as a bribe once he reassumed the role. Not only that, but he had also been lining his own pockets by dodging the taxes he was supposed to pay to the imperial court while serving as the manor's administrator, and he had poisoned the vice-envoy investigating his personal affairs, Reiko Shiki. With such a long list of wrongdoings, it would come as no surprise if he was officially sentenced to death.

"Taking the money he embezzled into consideration, the Saname clan will have to pay an enormous fee... Was it really to Choyo's advantage to kill his uncle?" Koshun muttered.

Meiin silently glanced over at the emperor.

"In this case, Choyo was able to proclaim that it was in the Saname clan's best interests to dispose of his uncle. His uncle's dissatisfaction with being forced to stay at home led him to become rather critical of Choyo. He started to insist on realizing the 'Saname clan's long-held wish,'" Koshun explained.

This information had been gathered from reports by Shiki and spies that had been sent to Ga Province.

"The Saname clan's long-held wish?" Meiin asked.

"To return to Kakami and become the country's rulers, apparently."

Meiin looked staggered. "He was willing to toss aside an affluent region like Ga Province just to embark on a journey over such rough waters? Who knows whether they'd even make it there in one piece! I dread to think how many of their boats would end up as wrecks. If they were to go when Ikahi Island was still there, then that would have been a different story—but it's not."

"The idea of returning to your hometown has a certain wistful allure to it, I suppose. Choyo's uncle passed that fanciful vision onto the younger members of the Saname clan and garnered some support in doing so."

"Well, innocent children are easily influenced. The more dreamlike and beautiful the story, the more susceptible they are to it," Meiin said.

"It must have been hard for him to turn a blind eye... Nobody should be allowed to lead young people astray."

Perhaps that was what troubled Choyo the most, Koshun thought to

himself. Even so, punishing his uncle in such a feckless manner would only cause the younger people to fight back. It would have made more sense if he got the imperial court involved and sacrifice the life of the individual who caused the upheaval to make up for it in order to “reduce the damage to the Saname clan.”

“Did he essentially...take advantage of his uncle’s rash behavior?” Meiin asked.

“Choyo could have easily stopped him before he conspired to make contact with Eitoku,” Koshun replied.

Choyo’s uncle had dug his own grave. He was trying to outsmart his nephew—just as Choyo wanted him to.

“I don’t like that.” Meiin furrowed his brow. “It’s as if he took advantage of Chief Secretariat Un and used him as a pawn too.”

“I’m sure he knew that Eitoku wouldn’t accept his uncle’s proposal, no matter how much he was offered in return. But even so...”

It had to be a complicated situation for Eitoku as well. Choyo anticipated he wouldn’t accept a bribe and would instead bring his attention to his uncle’s past wrongdoings—and as such, Eitoku had been used to Choyo’s advantage.

“He looked very uncomfortable.” Meiin laughed awkwardly. “Despite knowing that he was being exploited, he couldn’t help but do some investigating too. Oh yes, and he was unusually complimentary about Shiki.”

“Was he? I’m glad,” Koshun replied curtly. He expected Eitoku to take a liking to the scholar. Eitoku liked young people who were quick-witted, even if they lacked the support of powerful influences.

“I’m surprised you decided to send him as your messenger. This might be strange of me to say since I was the one who introduced him to you, but Shiki hasn’t been here for very long.”

“He’s...greedy,” Koshun commented.

“Is he?”

“When I had my position as heir taken from me, I was painfully aware of how powerless I was. He too understands that you can’t do anything without power. He’s not like those who come from distinguished families. They don’t realize the power they hold because they’ve never known any differently. I knew Shiki wouldn’t pass up the

opportunity to get close to Eitoku and gain his recognition. Even if he had been in communication with the Saname clan, he'd join my side after that. Even if it meant betraying them."

Unsurprisingly, Meiin opened his eyes wide in shock, unable to speak. A few moments later, however, he appeared to come back to his senses and cleared his throat.

"You mean...you didn't choose him because you trusted him?"

"In a way, I *do* trust him. Trust isn't about placing selfish expectations on people—it's more about recognizing the sort of person you are dealing with."

It was about seeing things for how they truly were rather than distorting them to suit your own interests. At least, that was what Koshun believed.

In that sense, Koshun trusted Choyo as well. He knew he wasn't the sort of man to do something so silly. He was also confident that he was yet to see what his goal truly was. Koshun would need to keep the Saname clan under close observation.

"What a commendable plan. Chief Secretariat Un will surely *insist* on leaving."

As soon as the Saname issue calmed down, Eitoku asked to resign from his post.

"No, I imagine that had more to do with his own frustration than anything I've done."

"Over what?" Meiin asked.

"Being seen as someone who could be coaxed with bribes, by someone like Choyo's uncle. Or being viewed as a crack in the imperial court. For Eitoku, being seen in such a light must have been unbearable," the emperor explained.

Rather than allowing the man to resign, Koshun planned on giving him the position of supervisor in the department of state affairs. Although the position was high in terms of rank, it had no real authority and was more of an honorary title.

"He is a leading figure in a prominent family, so I can't let him go for the time being. In the meantime, I would like for you and Gyotoku to work hard."

"We will strive to do our very best," Meiin replied. He brought his hands together in a sign of respect.

Meiin had recently been appointed to the role of chief secretariat, and Un Gyotoku had been moved from his previous role as vice-minister for the ministry of rites to a different post as chancellery director. Koshun had recently met with Gyotoku to discuss this issue.

"Eitoku seems unhappy with Gyotoku's gentle nature, but I believe it to be a rare asset. I'm sure the two of you balance each other out perfectly."

"Well, yes, since gentleness is a trait that I lack myself." A smile appeared on Meiin's intelligent face. Then, he shifted his gaze toward the lotus pond. "Oh, the rain stopped."

At some point, the weather had cleared up, leaving the moist, wet lotus buds to glisten in the sunlight. The sight was dazzling enough to make Koshun squint.

I need to see Jusetsu, he thought. He'd promised to visit her again. There was something that he wanted to discuss with her—just the two of them.

Having received another invitation from Banka, Jusetsu was visiting the Hakkaku Palace. Banka had made a full recovery and her complexion looked healthy too. She'd prepared some refreshments for Jusetsu as a thank-you.

"The present was from my great-uncle. Hakurai must have been the one who smuggled the bracelet in there. I didn't expect it to be something so terrifying! I'm sure I would have died if you hadn't saved me. I'm really grateful," Banka thanked her.

"I'm the last person you should be thanking..." Jusetsu said. "The curse was intended for me, after all."

"I'm glad I was the one who was affected by it, not you. After all, if you were to have collapsed, *nobody* would have been able to help." As painful as the fever must have been, Banka made no complaints whatsoever. She now seemed right as rain. "My great-uncle is a cheery and generous man, so I always considered him a good-hearted person. I can't imagine how this could have happened..."

Banka's great-uncle—Choyo's uncle—had apparently been

beheaded. Some corruption involving a manor had apparently occurred. Naturally, Jusetsu's source for that information was Tankai.

"Hakurai has been banished from Ga Province now, and the Eight True Teachings has collapsed too. I didn't think much of that religion, so that's a relief, if anything." Banka put a dried apricot in her mouth, followed by a toasted rice cake. It seemed like apricots were a favorite of hers.

"You said that Hakurai was sucking up to your father..." Jusetsu began.

Banka must have been delirious when she came out with that, because when Jusetsu reminded her of what she'd said, the Crane Consort cocked her head in surprise.

"I did? When I had a fever? I don't remember that. It's my great-uncle that Hakurai was sucking up to. He's got knee problems and insisted that Hakurai's prayers made them better. I'm sure Hakurai egged him on this time too." Banka frowned indignantly after that. She didn't seem to be Hakurai's biggest fan.

"...What's Hakurai like?" Jusetsu asked.

"What's he like? Hmm, well, he's about the same age as my dad—he's over forty—but he's quite gray for his age. Instead of wearing his hair up, he does this weird hairstyle instead. He has a cold, nasty look in his eyes, and I don't think Hakurai is even his real name. Who knows where he came from."

Jusetsu was trying to ask whether she had any resemblance to him, but there was no way Banka would have been able to tell.

"You'd be better off asking members of the Saname household. Were you hoping to get to know him?"

Jusetsu nodded. "Well, if possible."

"Oh my, organizing that should be no trouble at all. I'll send a letter to ask. Oh, hey, would it be all right if I can just call you 'Jusetsu'?"

Jusetsu was somewhat hesitant about this, but obliged, nonetheless. "You may," she said, accepting it.

A broad smile came to Banka's face. "Oh, wonderful! Make sure to just call me 'Banka' too, okay?"

Jusetsu recalled having a similar conversation with Kajo. In that case, however, the woman had asked permission to call Jusetsu “amei,” and requested that Jusetsu called her “aje” in exchange.

When they first met, Jusetsu had viewed Banka as a posh girl who was hard to figure out, but now that she was speaking to her regularly, it was clear that she was just a cheerful, carefree young girl.

The only thing that struck Jusetsu as strange was the way she would clam up and hang her head at times. It seemed like she wasn’t *entirely* carefree. At those times, Jusetsu wondered if Banka was thinking about her little sister, who was killed by the Saname curse.

As Jusetsu was leaving the Hakkaku Palace, Banka looked glum and stared at her for a few moments.

“Is something the matter?” Jusetsu asked.

Looking startled, Banka shook her head, and pasted a lifeless smile on her face.

After seeing Jusetsu off, Banka returned to her room, dismissed her ladies-in-waiting, and placed some hemp paper down on her table. An ink and a brush were already waiting there for her.

She needed to write a letter to her father. Banka received presents from her hometown rather frequently, and she still made sure to write a thank-you letter to her father every single time. Under the guise of updating him on recent goings-on in her life, she would supply him with information. That was Banka’s “duty.”

This time, there was a *lot* she needed to tell him.

First, there was the curse and her resulting fever, and then there was the way that Jusetsu saved her. Banka was sure her ladies-in-waiting would notify him of those events, but she wanted to do it herself too.

Banka didn’t pick up her brush immediately. Instead, she just stared at the light blue hemp paper with its pieces of gold foil scattered throughout.

She knew right away that the bracelet was no ordinary present. The ugly toad bracelet wasn’t to her great-uncle’s taste, nor her own. There was no way she could’ve known about the curse, but her instincts told her that there was something strange about the item. Even so, she

had deliberated sending it to Jusetsu for a little while. After all, wasn't that what her father wanted?

But she didn't. She didn't want anything bad to happen to the young woman.

But...if the bracelet *had* been sent under her father's instructions, would he be angry?

Banka slumped her shoulders. She didn't want her father to scold her—but she didn't want to disappoint him either. What if he abandoned her for being such a useless daughter?

Still, the fact remained that Jusetsu was innocent, just like Shozen was. She wouldn't have been able to bear seeing Jusetsu suffer, or worse. She didn't want to play a part in yet another innocent young girl's death.

Banka could still feel Shozen by her side, watching her. She felt like the girl was cursing her for being such a coward—a coward who babied her little sister only to abandon and kill her to save her own skin.

Banka covered her ears with her hands.

Dad. What should I do?

Her father's face came to mind. He had a strict air about him, like the sort of person who'd never let her be spoiled or allow her to complain. She remembered the cold expression he'd made when he told her to choose between her own life and Shozen's.

And yet, it was that same strictness that made him so respected and loved by not only members of his own clan, but by his people as well. Even Banka respected him—and as such, she didn't want him to dislike her. She didn't want him to be disappointed in her.

Banka picked up the brush at last. She listed everything that had happened as of late, including the curse incident.

She then put her brush back down. She wasn't sure whether she should tell her father about one particular issue or not.

Banka had placed a gardenia flower in Jusetsu's hair, and that was when she found out her secret—Jusetsu had clearly been dyeing her hair. It looked like her hair had been gray originally—either that, or silver. She couldn't be sure.

Banka wasn't sure whether to inform her father of that or if it was too unimportant to bother telling him. Even so, she could tell it was a secret that Jusetsu wanted to hide, and that was why she was dyeing it. She was concealing the truth. And that meant...

Banka picked up and put down the brush several more times. Visions of Jusetsu's face and her father's face alternated in her mind. Jusetsu was a nice girl. Banka wanted to be her friend. She had saved her life.

Banka sighed.

After a long period of deliberation, Banka finally picked up her brush again.

Koshun brought Jusetsu a strange kind of snack as a present. Jusetsu stared at the container. It smelled sweet. Inside it were some plums, which had been covered in a thin coat of sugar syrup.

"The plums have been candied, so they're hard. I thought you'd like this kind of thing, so I brought them for you."

Letting what Koshun was saying go in one ear and straight out of the other, Jusetsu picked up a candied treat. They were bright and shiny, like stars. Jusetsu carefully bit into one. The fragile candy coating crumbled as she sunk her teeth into it. When she bit into the plum at the same time, the soft, acidic flesh of the fruit and the crisp, sweet candy fused together and filled her mouth.

It was a kind of deliciousness she'd never experienced before.

"These are *wonderful*!" Jusetsu said.

These few words were enough to bring a faint smile to Koshun's face. "I'm pleased you think so."

Jusetsu made a mental note to give some to Jiujiu and the other residents of the Yamei Palace the next day, since she had already dismissed them. She then closed the lid of the container. Koshun stared as she licked the candy off her fingers, but his gaze made her feel uncomfortable, so she wiped it with her handkerchief instead.

"...So, what do you require from me tonight?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, about that..."

Koshun fell silent for a few moments, looking as if he was

searching for the right words to say. Jusetsu simply waited silently.

“There are several different things I need to talk to you about. To start off, I have two things to report. The first one...” Koshun raised his index finger. “I heard the Owl’s voice.”

Jusetsu frowned, not understanding what he meant. “Voice? What do you mean?”

“A short while ago, I received a large snail shell as a gift. It was a rare sort, with a coal-black shell that glistened iridescently. I heard a voice through it—the Owl. Apparently I was the only one who could hear it. Do you remember when I got that knife wound? He said it was because of that.”

As usual, the emperor spoke of it like a non-issue. Jusetsu held her temples as she processed what Koshun was saying.

“...And then?” she asked.

“Apparently, the Owl has been imprisoned for what he did back then, so he can’t touch you. In exchange, however, he told me to share some knowledge with him.”

“Knowledge?” *What does that mean?*

Koshun’s voice remained calm—as did the look in his eyes as he stared fixedly at Jusetsu. “He wants me to come up with a way of rescuing the Raven and helping you at the same time.”

“Helping me...?” Jusetsu repeated, her voice raspy.

“Exactly.”

Jusetsu went quiet. Since she wasn’t going to say anything, Koshun continued to speak instead.

“There may be a way that we can release the Raven without killing you. I’m going to look for one.”

“But then...what would happen to the Summer Sovereign?”

What would become of the Winter Sovereign and the Summer Sovereign once the Raven was released?

“I don’t know.” Koshun’s response was simple and unaffected. “That said, I doubt we’ll be safe if we continue as we are now either. Things are different than how they were all those years ago. There might be something new that we can learn in this situation. We might be able to find a new, better course of action.”

Then, Koshun raised another finger. “Next, Ho Ichigyo has been successfully captured. That’s my second piece of news. As a shaman, he knows things that we never will. He knows about the ao god and Uren Niangniang as well. His knowledge may prove to be useful.”

Jusetsu kept her eyes glued on Koshun as he calmly reeled off this information, his face lacking in expression. *Huh?*

She bit her lip. “Why...?”

“What is it?” Koshun asked.

“There’s no need for you to go this far, is there?” Jusetsu said.

Koshun fell silent for a moment and stared at Jusetsu’s face. “Yes, there is. We’re friends.” His voice remained quiet, but it was so decisive that this calmness didn’t seem to fit.

“With a lot of issues, I have to weigh up my options and decide to abandon all hope,” he explained. “Your situation was one such issue—I didn’t think I’d be able to get you out of this imperial estate. But if there is a way to be able to do that, I want to pursue it. Do you?”

Jusetsu clenched her hands together below the table. She was desperate to yell, “*Save me!*” but she never thought she’d have the nerve. But here Koshun was, trying to drag it out of her.

With her chest burning, Jusetsu hung her head. “...I can’t do it.” She clenched her fists even tighter. “I...can’t make that decision.”

“Why not?” Koshun asked quietly.

“If I... If I were to be saved...” Jusetsu closed her eyes. “It wouldn’t be fair to Reijo.”

As the Raven Consort, Reijo had lived out her life alone and in isolation. She’d raised Jusetsu with so much love. How could she possibly do that to her now?

“...Jusetsu.”

Jusetsu opened her eyes with a start. Koshun’s fingers brushed against her cheek.

“I never got to meet Reijo, but I can imagine how much love she showered you with. Just as she was there for you, you were there for her. You haven’t forgotten that have you?” Koshun’s voice gently seeped into the depths of Jusetsu’s heart and permeated her core. “Reijo loved you. Let yourself be saved.”

Jusetsu felt a burning lump at the back of her throat. It gradually made its way up, and Jusetsu's lip trembled. She felt like her plea for salvation that she had cast out into the darkness had finally been heard.

Koshun wiped Jusetsu's tears with his fingers. It was only then that Jusetsu finally realized that she was crying.

An idea that had always been so absolute in Jusetsu's mind unraveled and melted away.

Koshun softly stroked Jusetsu's cheek again with his hand.

Injo was playing by the rocks. She was getting drenched with water every time a wave rolled in and broke on the rocks, but this didn't deter her in the slightest from looking at all the little fish and shellfish left behind in the tidal pools. Hakurai watched her from a short distance away. The sea breeze ruffled his hair and made the sleeves of his long robe flutter about.

Half of Hakurai's face was covered with a cloth. With his remaining eye on his right, he shifted his gaze toward the sea. Far in the distance, he could make out the vague outline of an island.

"Is that Pafan Island?" asked the man who was standing beside him.

That man wore a conical hat, which cast a shadow across his face. He had come alone to see Hakurai off, not bringing any attendants to accompany him. He had a tough-looking face and a sharp, intense look in his eyes. He could force a kind smile in front of his people, but more typically, he didn't even show the faintest of smirks.

"Pafan Island is actually made up of a number of islands, all of different sizes. The biggest one—that one over there—is called Large Island. That is where you shall go," said the man—Choyo. "Boats come and go there every day, and the fish are wonderful. There's an abundant supply of fruit too. The island's residents are extremely peaceful and calm people. Don't let your bad habits come to the forefront and disturb the peace."

The edges of Hakurai's lips turned upward. His response was nothing but a slight smile.

"That eye of yours must make some things difficult. I'll get you a houseboy. He's a hard worker who can take care of everything from

cooking meals to repairing things around the house. If you need more help, you can employ whoever you like once you're over on the island."

"I'll be just fine. I plan on living a modest and quiet life. And I have Injo too, after all."

Choyo glanced over at the little girl. "Will she be of any use?"

Hakurai laughed. "Well, in a sense. She was born in a fishing village, so being near the sea is more suited to her nature."

"She was from Roko in Gei Province, wasn't she?"

"Indeed."

"Roko is a poor little village," Choyo commented.

"That's why they were so pleased when I asked to take her. Naturally, I made sure to pay them handsomely."

Choyo looked at Injo worriedly. If Hakurai had visited that village just a year later, she may have already been bought by an awful procurer for next to nothing. She could have even been sold to a brothel. With her tanned skin and beautiful, dark eyes, she was a very pretty little girl.

"I always assumed the Hatan clan to have a close relationship with their god, but Injo was an unexpected find."

The sea spray was getting higher, so Hakurai called her over. "Injo, come over here."

Injo didn't respond immediately, but after he called her name a second time, she turned around and started ambling up to him. She didn't look especially bright, but she was the only person with the gift of being able to communicate with Hakumyoshi.

All kinds of different things drifted onto the seashore from faraway places—shells, pieces of glass, drowned bodies, lost souls, and gods. That was why people sometimes referred to fishing spots as "drifting points."

The first time they met, Injo was gathering shells on the beach. She explained how pretty shells and pieces of glass were sold in the nearby inn town as souvenirs. Since they drifted ashore from the land of the gods, they could be used as good-luck charms. There were a few other children on the beach collecting shells as well, all barefoot and dressed in shabby, poor-quality robes.

“There’s a god at the bottom of the sea,” Injo had said. “If you put your ear to a shell like this, you can hear its voice. It’s right at the very bottom, as deep as you can go. It’s pitch-black down there, just like it is at night, so all the gods are asleep. But this one god woke up. It told me it had been waiting all this time.”

“For what?”

“For me,” Injo had replied. “Look at this, mister. It’s a cherry blossom-colored tellin shell.” Injo had drawn closer to Hakurai and showed it to him. “It’s in perfect shape.” Her eyes were sparkling—unchipped shells could be sold for a relatively higher price.

Hakurai sighed at that. “You won’t be needing anything like that anymore.”

Her new life wouldn’t require her to walk barefoot to sell her wares any longer, but that day, she completely ignored what Hakurai was saying. Instead, she cheerfully placed the shell in a small pouch and shoved it into her breast pocket. Her mother had made the pouch for her, but that was years ago—it was now dirty and worn out in several places.

While Hakurai frowned bitterly at those thoughts, Choyo turned to Injo and held out his fist.

“Give me your hands,” Choyo urged her.

Injo held out both of her hands, looking intrigued. Choyo then scattered some shells onto her palms. They were small, silver-lipped pearl oyster shells that shimmered iridescently on the inside. They were a kind of shell that was used for decorative inlays.

“Wow!” Injo’s face flushed red at the sparkling sight. “I could make a fortune selling these!”

I don’t think you would, thought Hakurai, placing his hands on his forehead.

Choyo, on the other hand, narrowed his eyes at her in a gentle manner. “I got a merchant to give them to me since they weren’t good enough to use for inlays. I heard you liked shells.”

“Thank you!” Injo grinned from ear to ear as she carefully put them in her pouch.

Hakurai rarely let Injo be seen by other people—he could never be too sure what she might say—so even when he did, he wouldn’t let her

speak. It was best to keep some things mysterious.

Hakurai took out his handkerchief and dried off Injo's seawater-soaked robe and hair, and she meekly allowed him to do so. Although she'd grown somewhat fond of him, she still called Hakurai "mister" instead of by his name.

"Besides, it's not like that's your actual name," she always said—and she was right.

Hakurai placed his hand on her back and turned toward the harbor. Just a few steps in front of him was a wharf where the ferry was awaiting its passengers.

"Your houseboy should be there to greet you at Large Island's harbor. I expect he'll have finished cleaning your home by now."

"I greatly appreciate your kind assistance," said Hakurai.

Choyo's expression suggested that he wasn't taking Hakurai's expression of gratitude seriously at all. He stared over at the island. "You should focus on recuperating for a while. I'm sure your injuries are still causing you pain."

"...I'm at fault for stupidly borrowing that divine treasure. The pain is nothing compared to the shame my own foolishness has brought me," Hakurai replied.

"I don't think you need to worry about that jewel. It was a cursed heirloom that we had been trying to break for generations to no avail. I'm *thankful* for what you did." Choyo said, glancing at Hakurai. "And after all, I'm not the only one who lost something. The Eight True Teachings, the religion you put so much care into developing, is now no more."

"I couldn't care less about that," he replied, and it was true. The Eight True Teachings may have crumbled, but as long as he had Injo and Hakumyoshi, that didn't matter.

"Well, if you say so," said Choyo. "Now, it's about time I said my goodbyes. Take care of yourself."

"I will."

In truth, Choyo didn't *need* to put himself at risk by making an effort to see Hakurai off. The man had supposedly been banished from Ga Province. Choyo would have hated for anybody to see Hakurai here, or for anyone to spot the two of them exchanging kind words. Even so,

he felt obligated to give him a personal send-off.

“Call me when you need me again,” said Hakurai.

This time, Choyo had used Hakurai to dispose of his bothersome uncle, but who knew what he would need next.

Hakurai and Injo made their way over to the harbor. Choyo spent a few moments watching them before departing as well, leaving the rocky area behind him.

When people called her Injo, it always took her a moment to respond. After all, it wasn't her real name.

This time was no exception. He called her name as the boat was rocking on the waves and she was peering at the water's surface. It wasn't until he repeated himself countless times that she actually turned around—only to find Hakurai with a scary look on his face.

“Don't peer into the water,” he said. “You'll fall.”

“I just can't make out the bottom of the sea.”

Although she'd been raised in a fishing village, Injo hadn't had many opportunities to ride on a boat. Going out to sea was a man's job. She, along with the other girls and the young boys who weren't old enough to go fishing yet, would spend their time picking up shells, mending nets, or listening to legends that the elderly villagers would share.

On the days when the weather was particularly bad, she would sit by the fireside with her arms wrapped around her knees and listen to her elders' stories with the other children.

That reminded her... How was that little boy she used to be friends with doing? The one who used to clutch his knees and listen to the stories with her. The one who went to the imperial capital.

Injo gazed at the dark indigo seawater. Every time the waves crashed against the boat and made it sway, she would whisper her own *real* name—to make sure she wouldn't forget it.

“Ayura... Ayura.”

I need to make sure I don't forget his name either, she thought. She pressed on the pouch in her breast pocket over the fabric of her robe. The shells Choyo gave her were in there.

I wonder what he's up to.

The boy was a real crybaby, so she wondered if he might be in tears at that very minute. She was worried about him.

Ishiha.

“Ishiha...”

Her whisper was crushed by the waves and sank to the bottom of the sea.



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